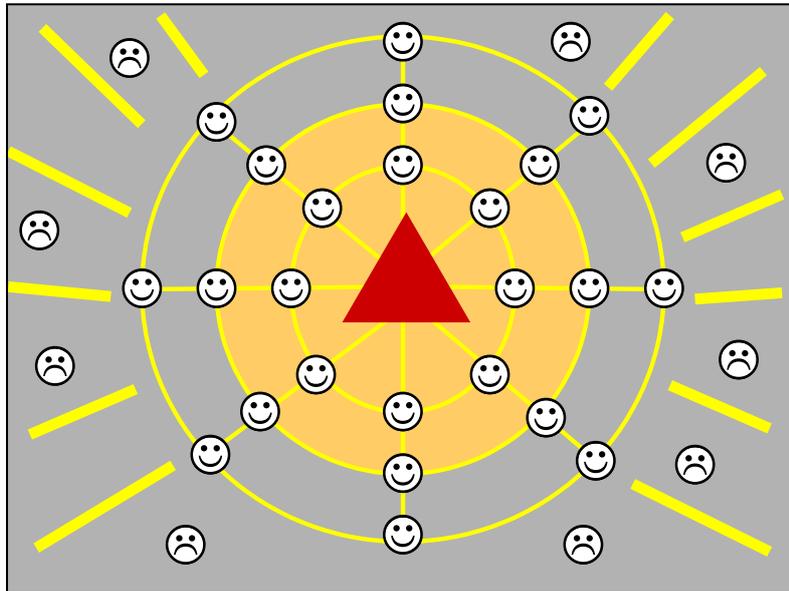


## God is a Community Part 6: Grace



**“There is nothing you can do to make God love you more;  
there is nothing you can do to make God love you less.”**

### **Justification by Grace Alone**

To be justified means to be in a right relationship with God. In the context of our present study, we can define justification further as being brought into participation in the Divine-Human Community of Love, where we enjoy right relationships with both God and others (as well as ourselves and our environment). Because sin has ruined our relationships with God and others, it is no simple matter to be placed in a right relationship with God. As we have seen in our study on salvation, the healing of our relationship with God was a very costly process, one that ultimately cost Jesus his life and tore apart the inner life of the Trinity. The power of sin and its consequences was so great in fact that the only power in the universe strong enough to overcome it was the power of Love. We have already seen how this process of salvation played itself out in the life and work of Jesus Christ, but now we turn to the question of how individual believers and communities come to participate in or benefit from the salvation that was won for us by Jesus.

Christians are agreed that the way this happens is by a pure and free gift of grace from God to us. The doctrine of grace teaches that any benefits, blessings and consolation that we receive from God are completely unearned and undeserved. They derive from God’s own character, which is love, and not from any goodness, effort or worthiness on our part. The way that this concept is often expressed (notably by Philip Yancey in his recent book, “What’s so Amazing about Grace?”) is in the couplet:

“There is nothing you can do to make God love you more;  
there is nothing you can do to make God love you less.”

The points being made here are: a) That we cannot earn God’s love through good works, lest we should try to take credit for deserving God’s love; and b) that God’s gracious love can reach us no matter how badly we have sinned.

This is not to say that there is no connection between justification and good works, nor that being justified is compatible with ongoing sin. Christians also believe that the person who is justified undergoes a process of sanctification which involves an inner renewal that includes repentance, restitution and acts of love. The diagrams of the Community of Love that we have been using illustrate this point as follows: The individuals who are included in the Community of Love participate in the community through healed relationships. They are both loved by God and others in the community, and they love God and others in turn. What is important to note though is the order of events: Justification comes before good works. We do not do good works so that we earn justification. We are justified and then do good works as a response of gratitude.

### **The Role of Faith**

Our response of gratitude to God is an act of faith, and it is this faith that enables us to appropriate God's gracious gifts of justification and sanctification. Faith is a response to a person, and in particular Christian faith is a response of trusting, believing and relying on God and Christ. We can distinguish at least three aspects of this faith response. Firstly, it involves knowledge of certain reasonable facts. This is not the same as saying that belief in God can be proven by reason, it simply means that faith is not a blind leap into the dark but is rather based on truths that can be reasonably believed. Secondly, it involves positive assent to certain statements of faith, usually contained in creeds and confessions. Finally, it involves an active trust and involvement in the truths that are believed – i.e. faith is lived out in the life of the believer.

Although faith is very much something that we do, in the “economy” of salvation it is also seen as one of the gifts of God. Why is this so? Firstly, the power of faith lies in the object of the faith and not in the strength of the believer's ability to believe. Let us say that you are about to cross a rope bridge over a raging river. You have faith that the bridge will hold your weight as you make your way across it. Whether or not you fall into the river does not depend on how strong your faith is, but on how strong the ropes are. Similarly, our faith in God is sure, not because our faith feels strong, but because God is completely trustworthy. Secondly, faith can be seen as a gift because God invites us to believe, opens our eyes so that we can see the reasonableness of what we believe, and helps us to overcome our weakness in believing.

### **Predestination**

This strong emphasis on God's initiative in bringing about our justification raises the question: Who then can be saved? The Biblical answer lies in the doctrine of predestination (Rom 8:28-30, Eph 1:3-14) which teaches that those who are saved can only thank God for deciding to save them. Unfortunately, reflection on this doctrine has led to very disturbing conclusions among some theologians. “If God decides (or chooses) to save certain people and predestine them for eternal salvation,” they reason, “then God must similarly choose others to be predestined for eternal damnation.” The corollaries of such a line of thought are a) that God is seen as a capricious tyrant who wills the damnation of some of his creatures, and b) that our eternal destinies are so far out of our control that we may as well be fatalistic in our approach to life and faith.

The doctrine of predestination is indeed a difficult doctrine to grasp fully, but it helps to make a distinction between two brands of the doctrine. Firstly, there is the doctrine of predestination proper which has had its proponents throughout the ages such as Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century and Calvin in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. This doctrine teaches that those who are saved are chosen for salvation by God. Secondly, there is the doctrine of double predestination, which has also had its champions over the years. This doctrine teaches that God chooses some for salvation and chooses others for damnation. The distinction between the two seems very narrow, and it appears at first glance as though belief in predestination will necessarily lead to belief in double predestination. But it is important to note that neither Augustine nor Calvin seems to have taken this latter step. Instead they seem to have kept the two sides of the matter in tension. For both of them, the core issue at stake was to ensure that nobody could claim responsibility for their own salvation, but would rather remain eternally grateful to God.

Even if we deny that God actively chooses some people for damnation though, it would seem that by not choosing them for salvation, he consigns them to damnation – by not saving them he leaves them to their fate. Some theologians have no problem with this line of thought because, they point out, this fate is what we all deserve anyway for sinning. So God is not unjust in allowing us to get what we deserve. Others have suggested that in fact God has chosen and predestined everyone for salvation. These theologians must then choose either to believe that eventually everyone will be saved, or to believe that in the end we have the power (or free will) to reject God’s offer of salvation. Whichever line you take (except for double predestination), it seems that at least the following is true: If you are saved, you have no-one to thank but God; if you are damned, you have no-one to blame but yourself.

### **What happens after you die?**

Before delving into this topic I want to re-emphasize the fact that salvation is not limited to what happens to us after we die. Salvation, as participation in the Community of Love, is something we can experience already in this life and which we believe continues in the next life. So we turn to a consideration of the “next life”.

The short answer to the question “What happens after you die?” is “We don’t know,” since we have no experience to draw on in this regard. Nevertheless, we do have certain beliefs about life after death, primarily as a result of Jesus’ Resurrection and what He has revealed to us about his own life after death and the hope that he has given us, his followers. Firstly, we believe that there is life after death. Christians understand this “next life” as a gift received on the basis of the Resurrection and not as inevitability. Greek philosophy and popular modern Western thought conceives of human beings each having an eternal soul which lives on once our body dies. The Biblical picture, by contrast, is that each individual is created, lives and dies. After death, the person is resurrected bodily (albeit with a new body) as Jesus was, and this resurrection is a new creation and a gift of God. Secondly, we believe that after death there is a judgment, that Jesus is the judge and that on the basis of the judgment we will experience either Heaven or Hell.

## **Heaven and Hell**

Classical images of Heaven and Hell have painted a frightening picture for most people of the final judgment. It should be borne in mind however that the judge in this case is none other than the Saviour who forgives sinners. In a very important sense, then, our judgment has already been spoken and the verdict was a resounding acquittal. In fact, not only are we sure of the outcome of judgment itself, but we already participate in its benefits by living our lives within the unity of the Community of Love here and now. Heaven, then, is not all that different to what we already experience of God's love and community, it is merely the full flowering of that community. In effect it will be the eternal experience of God's love and community with all the ambiguity of sin, pain and suffering removed.

By the same token, there are those who have rejected God's love and community and have excluded themselves from the Community of Love. The doctrine of Hell is simply the belief that it will be possible for these people to exclude themselves from that Community for all eternity. Hell, then, is not all that different to what people already experience in this life when they isolate themselves and reject God's love and community, it is merely the full flowering of that rejection. In effect Hell will be the eternal experience of sin, pain and suffering with the hope of God's love and community removed.

## **The end of the world as we know it**

Without getting entangled in the highly complex figurative and poetic world of the Bible's apocalyptic literature (Daniel and The Revelation for example), there are a few things that we can say about the Christian hope concerning the end of the world. I call it a "hope" because the Christian view of the end of history is entirely positive, and not the frightening cataclysm depicted by Hollywood.

Firstly, we believe that history has a beginning and an end and that it lies in the hands of God. God created the world as we know it and God will bring it to an end. God's creation and God's ongoing sustaining of the creation has been loving throughout and there is no reason therefore to believe that God will not bring it to an end in a loving way.

Secondly, we believe that the history of this universe will culminate in the *parousia* of Jesus Christ. Often referred to as the "Second Coming", the *parousia* refers to the hope that we will one day share fully in Christ's risen life and that all things will be brought to their final fulfillment.

Thirdly, we believe that at his *parousia*, Christ will finally gain victory over sin and all its evils and bring about a new creation in which there will be a totally transformed new heaven and new earth.