

Grace and Obedience: The Spiritual Two-Step

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Published: July 07, 2014

Since the beginning of the New Testament church, a contrast has been identified between grace and obedience, grace and law, or God's work and our work. They are typically placed on opposite sides of a scale, and the pastoral task is to figure out how to strike the right balance between them. When in doubt, opt for fifty-fifty—that seems like a wise approach. Spend half your time talking about grace and the other half talking about obedience. That seems to fit the Apostle Paul's style in which he spends roughly the first half of an epistle on grace, and then follows with his inevitable "therefore" and a call to obedience. But all this is a bit more complicated in practice, especially given how this has been a perennial issue in the history of the Christian church. It is a hot issue even now.

It's the order, not the percentages, that's important.

What is clear in Scripture is that God always makes the first move. He made the first move toward us from the time the foundations of the earth were laid, and he makes it at this moment. He is the pursuer, the inviter, the one who says "I love you" first. The issue is not so much percentages or which is weightier; the issue is which comes first and has primacy. "We love because *he* first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

One of the rediscoveries of this generation is that Christ's initiatives toward us do not stop at conversion. The myth is that he came to us in love, and now it is up to us to get on with it. Instead, like manna, his initiatives of mercy and grace are new everyday. Each morning, he makes the first move.

And that's the way he has always done it. Even in the Ten Commandments, a document that appears to be all law, he begins, "I am the Lord your God, who took you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). Then we respond by imitating the one who moved toward us.

In practice, we linger on his initiative. In the two-step of our spiritual life, in which step one is God's grace and step two is our response, the steps are spelled out like this: oooooonne and two, and oooooonne and two. Hold that first position, then go to the second.

Step One..... Step Two

In the last week, I have noticed some variations on these two steps.

- One man knew the two-step better than I, but you would never know it from the conversation. It was all about what he had *not* done, and Jesus was left way back at his conversion. The task for him: linger on the first step. We spoke about the sentence structure of Ephesians, where Paul gets carried away when he talks about what Jesus has done and is doing—he speaks in world-class run-on sentences (step 1). Then, when he gets to application (step 2), he is succinct—a little less rhapsodic).
- One woman was wretched on the second step, so we raised the obvious question. "Do you know what Jesus has done? And I ask that because it certainly seems as if you do not." The task for her: read about, talk about, hear about and illustrate the initiating love of Jesus toward you until you confess your anger toward your sister.
- One man was enjoying the gospel of grace and waiting for his obedience to be natural; otherwise, he thought it would be less authentic and legalistic. But "authentic" is not all it's cracked up to be. It is right to break a spiritual sweat everyday, and I am assuming that very few people like to sweat. His task: be compelled by Christ, and then we simply prayed together. Prayer is always a suitable response to grace.

Yes, this is so simple. But like most things in the Christian life, a full lifespan is not enough time to master it.