



October 13, 2024

“Strings”

Sunday school at 9:30, Service at 10:30.

News:

Wednesday Evenings at Alêtheia 6:30-8:00

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For the Kids: What is a gift? What’s the difference between a gift and a purchase? If you accept the gift, what’s the difference between owing a debt and the responsibilities that come with the gift itself?

Some couldn’t accept the idea that the Messiah provided a Salvation that was spiritual rather than physical.

In this case, they were the Jews who felt that their status and hard work were sufficient spiritually.

The Grace of God in the Gospel of Jesus negated all their efforts.

Anti-Calvinistic doctrine stipulates that Salvation is a cooperative effort between God and man – technically called Synergism.

In spite of Ephesians 2:8&9, most humans want to contribute to their Salvation, or at least to their Sanctification.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his “Cheap Grace.”

Fill out the other side, detach this part of the page, and place it in the offering plate or the prayer/suggestion box in the lobby or with an Elder or Deacon of the church.

God Bless You!

People mistake strings attached to the Gift with strings that are inherent in the Gift.

It's the same with Agapê or forgiveness...

The doing of Christianity must come as a consequence never as a cause.

ACTS 13:46-48a ~

The "Seed of Abraham," singular, was to be from the seeds of Abraham, plural.

The Jews were always supposed to be a beacon of hope to the entire world.

Has the church been used by God to change human hearts, or has the church been used by Satan to push the less godly and the ungodly away?

ACTS 13:48b-52 ~

If anyone, Jew or Gentile, deems themselves "unworthy of eternal life," the Gospel moves on to someone willing.

As a minister of God's Grace, you are an ambassador representing God and His desire to make peace with the other person... Be winsome.

Don't miss the last half of verse 48... Perspective.

Joy, χαρά (xä-rä), is not the joy we typically think of today...

Your birthright as well.

Write a brief note – detach and place in the offering, or the prayer box, or give it to a Deacon or Elder.

Name _____ Address _____
 Phone _____ Email _____

Last time we were together we talked about Paul's sermon in the synagogue in the small city of Antioch near Pisidia. Specifically, we talked about how he ended his sermon with a warning to the Jews who couldn't accept the idea that the long-awaited Messiah was Jesus and that the Salvation that He provided was spiritual rather than physical.

Can you see why that would be foolishness to high achieving Jews – Jews who felt that they followed the rules of Judaism well – those who worked hard to perform to an acceptable standard? To them it seemed that the Gospel of Jesus negated all their efforts – anyone could simply believe in Jesus and be Saved? It was appalling.

That is still an impossible pill for many Christians to swallow. The primary reason that so many Christians reject the notion of Calvinism is because it takes Salvation out of human hands. I'm not talking about the issue of sovereignty versus autonomy, and I'm not saying that Calvinism is correct, I'm simply saying that the main objection to it is the idea that Salvation is 100% God and zero percent man.

Man... people, especially hard-working high-achieving people don't like that idea at all. It diminishes their work. The clearest, most accurate understanding of non-Calvinistic, or anti-Calvinistic doctrine, is that Salvation is a cooperative effort between God and man – technically called Synergism (working together). God puts out a call to all and some humans choose to respond – the two parties work together to effect Salvation.

Again, I'm not talking about Calvinism, I'm just pointing out that many people throughout time, including the ancient Jews, have had serious heartburn with a spiritual Salvation that comes simply through "faith and that not of yourself," "that not as a result of works," as the Bible makes clear in Ephesians 2:8&9. Most humans want to contribute to their Salvation or at least to their Sanctification. They cannot tolerate the idea that entire Salvation is an unmerited, undeserved, unearned, and more importantly unearnable Gift.

You've heard people derisively denounce what they call "Cheap Grace." The thought is that Grace should cost a person – that there is a debt owed and usually it is a debt that needs to be paid in the currency of "being good," of following the rules. Well, if that was right, we

would need to come up with a different word for the “Gift of God,” because Grace means something that is unmerited, undeserved, unearned, and more importantly unearnable. You can’t earn or deserve it – no one can. For many reasons, including semantically, it must be a free Gift given without any strings attached, other than, of course, the strings that are intrinsic to the Gift itself.

I’m going to explain that by defining what the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was talking about when he coined the term “Cheap Grace” in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He wrote that “cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.” Bonhoeffer was right in his chastisement, but what he was talking about in developing the term “cheap grace,” or as we say, “easy grace,” isn’t what people mean by those terms today.

In fact, the cheapening of Grace isn’t when people accept it as a free Gift, but when we actually think that

we deserve it. If I can earn a bit of Grace, it must not be nearly as valuable as I thought.

People mistake strings attached to the Gift with strings that are inherent in the Gift. If Grace costs us anything at all – if there are any strings attached to it at all, then it is not Grace. That would be strings attached to the Gift, changing it from a Gift to a transaction.

However, The Gift itself is the Gift that it is and not the Gift that it isn't. There are intrinsic strings attached to every Gift. If I give you a rifle and you accept it, you have just taken responsibility as the owner of a firearm. That's not strings attached to the giving of the gift, that's strings that are intrinsic to the gift – that are part and parcel to the Gift itself.

It's the same with Agapê or forgiveness. God can't love unconditionally if there are conditions – if there are strings attached to His giving of the gift of Agapê. But Agapê is Agapê and as such it comes with the intrinsic elements that make it Agapê. If Agapê wasn't defined by what it is it wouldn't be Agapê. See how Agapê must by definition come with the parameters that make it what it is? Strings that are inherent, intrinsic, integral, and essential to what it is.

Let's take a stab at it with forgiveness. If I have wronged you and you require me to do anything at all before you forgive me, you have not forgiven me. In such a case I will have earned my forgiveness from you to some degree. True forgiveness means granting forgiveness that is undeserved. If someone deserves forgiveness and you give it to them you've merely paid them what they earned – you simply paid them their wages. Forgiveness is an intellectual choice, based upon your character, to give another person the unconditional gift of pardon, regardless of their character.

If you require apology, repentance, penance, or quid pro quo, the forgiveness you give is a transaction, not a gift. It's like giving a friend a present for their birthday expecting a similar present from them on your birthday. That's a transaction.

Let me also say that weak people cannot forgive. The only way to gain the strength of character to forgive others is through the Holy Spirit insight that you are no better than they. That you did not deserve forgiveness any more than they and yet God bled and died to forgive you completely and forever.

By accepting the completely free Gift of God's Grace, no strings attached, Grace incurs the boundaries or parameters or intrinsic strings of the Gift itself. The Gift of Grace is right relationship with God through faith in the completed work of Jesus removing your sin.

Well, obviously right-relationship with God, comes with the parameters of right-relationship with God. Right-relationship with God means that He is God, and you are His child. It means that you will function in that relationship. That means a genuine repentance necessary to rightly relating – we need to stop living in opposition to God and instead live in conformity to Him.

That's repentance which is only possible after confession. Confession means to recognize where you were in opposition to God. What precedes confession? Conviction and appropriate shame.

Let's take it the other way around... The Holy Spirit convicts a person of their opposition to God, which is sin. We embrace His conviction and feel remorse – we embrace our guilt as well as our inability to fix our self-centered sinfulness. Then the Holy Spirit convinces us of something quite remarkable. God unilaterally paid

the sin debt we could never pay by handing over the Word of God to vicious, sadistic, inhuman humans.

We then repent, recognizing that we were going the wrong way, we then turn around, and begin heading the right way. We head the right way, not to earn anything, but because that's the direction that children of God travel life's highway.

Part of that is a conformity to the church, if one is to be Baptized as a member of the church. As a member one behaves in a way appropriate to being a member. That's not strings attached to church membership, that's the strings that define what it means to be a member.

The Cross means that Jesus through His horrific disfiguring and agonizing death is the source of Grace. That Jesus Resurrected and living in you by His Spirit is what Christianity is.

Bonhoeffer was right about the necessity to accept the Gift of Grace that God actually offers free of charge. That Gift has no strings attached. There is nothing that any human needs to do or can do to earn even the tiniest sliver of His Grace, but at the same time, the

Grace He offers is a Gift of right-relationship with Him and to truly accept that Gift, you need to live in right-relationship with God.

The doing of Christianity must come as a consequence never as a cause. Well, that very concept was great news to the Gentiles. Hooray! We can be God's children too, because it no longer is the birthright of Jews, but is available to all who believe enough to actually accept the free Gift of Grace as it is given and for what it is.

What then did God say to those still clinging to a work-based synergism... Acts 13:46-48a, 46Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first. Since you repudiate it and consider yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. 47For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I have appointed you as a Light to the Gentiles, That You may bring salvation to the end of the earth.' " 48aWhen the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord;"

In verses 46&47 Paul shares two interrelated, interwoven, enmeshed Divine promises/Biblical insights/family of God responsibilities.

The first is that the “Seed of Abraham,” singular, was to be from the seeds of Abraham, plural. Meaning that the Jews were God’s chosen people whom He had promised to Save by sending them a Jewish Savior. Second that as God’s chosen people there were strings intrinsic to that status and position, meaning that they had responsibilities that were part and parcel to being the Children of God.

First, God chose Israel as a nation to be His people of Promise – the promise made to Abraham. God gave them time to coalesce as a people and He gave them the Law and He gave them a guarantee that His promise to Abraham would be fulfilled through Abraham’s singular Seed, the Messiah.

Jesus was the Jewish Savior. The Jews had first right of refusal, so to speak. The Jews were the primary target of Salvation, but it was always intended that Salvation would spill over to the Gentiles. As God says to the Messiah in Isaiah 49:6, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of

Jacob (the descendants of Abraham) and to restore the protected ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Notice that Jesus and all of the Apostles including Paul, the “Apostle to the Gentiles” were Jews. Salvation came from God to the Gentiles through His chosen people.

That transitions us to the second, closely related, bit... The Jews were always supposed to be a beacon of hope to the entire world. God Himself planted them at the physical crossroads of the world at that time. All of Europe, Asia, and Africa moved through the Levant – what is now modern-day Israel. Wars raged back and forth, but also refugees and trade.

Jerusalem under Jewish control was always a cosmopolitan, multiethnic, multicultural, metropolis. The Jews were to be salt and light to the Gentiles for the purpose of bringing them to a knowledge of the One True God as God said in Isaiah 42:6, “I am the Lord, I have called You in righteousness, I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You, And I will appoint

You as a covenant to the people, As a light to the nations.”

God was talking about the Messiah there as a part of the legacy of Israel which includes Israel as a whole. The Jews were tasked with assisting God in changing the hearts of the less godly people inside of Judaism and the ungodly outside of it.

Instead, they created a hyper-religious legalism that emphasized bloodlines and performance with hardly any regard to the heart at all.

They saw other factions within Judaism as their enemies and were constantly bickering and, at times, fighting with them. They saw Gentiles as sub-human vile and dissolute creatures unworthy of God’s blessings. Sure, there were some Gentile proselytes – non-Jews trying to convert to Judaism – but the Jews made it a complex, difficult, and protracted process where such candidates had to jump through seemingly endless hoops and if they ever made it, they were never considered more than third-class Jews behind the pureblood Jews and the lesser half-bloods. It’s the same today.

Does all of that remind you of anything? Hasn't God required Christians to act in the same way? Haven't we been commanded by Jesus to actively assist Him in changing the hearts of the less godly within the church and the ungodly outside of it?

Has the church been used by God to change human hearts, or has the church been used by Satan to push the less godly and the ungodly away? Let's personalize that... Have you been used by God to change human hearts, or have you been used by Satan to push the less godly and the ungodly away from you and the church? Just questions – just something to think about.

God was always going to bless the whole of humanity through the Jews and whether they could accept that or not, it wasn't going to change God's purposes. Grace came to mankind through Jesus Christ the Word of Almighty God to the Jew first and then to the rest of humanity.

That's what we get from the end of the chapter. Paul and Barnabas tried to share the Gospel – that's unconditional Love without strings attached, but they met with active opposition. They said "fine," and walked away – that's a boundary set as a condition inherent in

the Gift itself. The Gospel cannot have its intended effect unless it is embraced.

They would have been thrilled to share the Gospel again with those same persecutors if they later showed interest. The Gospel like Grace, Agapê and Forgiveness is unconditional... For those who do accept the conditions are part of what is accepted as defining characteristics of the Gift itself.

Acts 13:48b-52, 48band all who had been appointed to eternal life believed. 49And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. 50But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their region. 51But they shook off the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. 52And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

If anyone, Jew or Gentile, deems themselves “unworthy of eternal life,” the Gospel moves on to someone willing. It still works that way. If God offers you Salvation and you refuse, He simply moves on to

the next person and you have missed God's purpose for you. It may or may not come around for you again.

I have said it so many times, I know that you're tired of hearing it by now, but it must be said... When, not if, but when you personally share Christ with someone else and it turns into an argument it is because you made it about you.

You, as a minister of God's Grace in Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit are merely a vessel through whom God operates. You are an ambassador, a mediator, a conduit. The issue is between Almighty God, Whom you represent, and another human being. Be winsome.

You must allow God to lovingly, peaceably, patiently, kindly, gently, move that person through you and then you must leave the results in His hands. If they refuse, "shake the dust off your feet" and walk away. That's your role in the matter.

Then when you are persecuted for ministering the Gospel rejoice because a new adventure is dawning. Those Jews in Antioch pushed our friends away which caused them to move to new people and new opportunities. God always knows what He's doing.

Two other quick notes. I don't want you to miss the last half of verse 48. "All who had been appointed to eternal life believed." Dissect those few words very carefully. "All" literally means every single one without exception. It isn't like there was one person appointed who got overlooked, no one falls through the cracks.

The phrase "appointed to eternal life" is just as simple as it seems. God has, before He ever began creating the material reality we call the universe, already appointed each and every person. It is called Sovereignty. It is as Biblically certain as Salvation itself. It is impossible for God to not have appointed everyone. I won't belabor that now, but if you have questions, I'm happy to chat about it with you.

For a taste... Every person who will be in Heaven is already in Heaven from God's perspective... There's more. The bit that Calvinists get right is that from God's perspective, it is His divine appointing.

Now, get a load of this... The final word there is "believed." My dear friends, "believed" is a verb – you remember, those action words. The people "believed." From a human perspective we must choose to

“believe” that Jesus is the Christ, the Word of God made flesh. We must choose to accept Him as our Savior and embrace Him as our Lord. Perspective.

The second thing I want to mention is the close of the chapter. I’m here to tell you that things got ugly in Antioch, and they are about to get a whole lot uglier in the next chapter, but the true disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ are continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Those two things go hand-in-hand. In fact, if you are not filled with joy, it is because you are ignoring the Holy Spirit.

Joy, Biblical, Christian Joy, χαρά (xä-rä), is not the joy we typically think of today. It is an inner sense of well-being. It is the ability to keep your head, when everyone around you is losing theirs. It comes from knowing that everything is going to turn out exactly how God plans and that the greatest possible good will come from it and that at the end of what is a relatively short life, eternity in His presence awaits.

God knows me, He loves, me, He chose me, He is in me, and I am in Him. There is nothing I need to fear.

That's joy. As I said, things are getting ugly and it's going to get worse, but they were Spirit-filled Christians focused on Jesus and His agenda, so they were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

If you have been Born Again from Above, that is your birthright as well.