

## The challenge of Grace to Legalism and Libertinism

Ephesians 2:1-10 Matthew 9:9-13 Julian Templeton

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### Matthew 9:9-13, the *Alternative Version*

Jesus saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Are you good enough to follow me?" asked Jesus. And Matthew replied, "Come and see what company I keep, and then you can be the judge of whether I am good enough to be your disciple."

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

On hearing this, Jesus said, 'The Pharisees have made a fair point, I have my reputation to think about and I am at risk of damaging it by associating with tax collectors and sinners. I think I'll not try to be a doctor to the sick anymore but concentrate on the healthy. I'll also ignore the Scripture: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' Trying to be merciful is so draining and time-consuming; sacrifice is so much quicker and easier. Matthew, I've decided I'm not going to call sinners like you anymore; I'm going to call the righteous only. And, with that, Jesus left Matthew's house and was last seen walking arm in arm with the Pharisees, to the astonishment of the disciples.

I have taken the risk of radically changing this Gospel story in order to demonstrate just how out-of-character and disturbing it sounds. The Jesus I've just portrayed does not

sound anything like the Jesus we read about in the Gospels. Why is this?

**Q.** What is it about Jesus's reactions in my alternative version that seem so wrong?

*Legalism* is the tendency to think: 'If we keep the rules then we will be in the right.' Or 'If we keep ourselves away from bad people then we will maintain our purity.' What completely challenges the basis of legalism is *grace*.

Grace is a gift that is offered by the giver without any consideration of the worthiness of the receiver. So in the proper version of the calling of Matthew, Jesus does not ask, 'Are you good enough to follow me?' he simply says: "Follow me." The call to Matthew to become Jesus's disciple is a gift. It is a gracious gift because Jesus knows that Matthew is a tax collector, he knows what company he keeps, but calls him anyway. And in the proper version Jesus does not agree with the Pharisees' assumption that associating with bad company is automatically an indication of bad character; rather Jesus directly challenges their legalistic attitude by saying "It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. Go and learn what this means, (and Jesus quotes from the Prophet Hosea): "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." (Hos. 6:6)

Hosea was a prophet whom the Lord commanded to take for himself a prostitute, Gomer, as his wife. But part way through their marriage Gomer goes back to her former way of life. However, the Lord instructs Hosea to seek her out and take her back as his wife, since their relationship is a living parable of the Lord's relationship with the people of Israel. Israel is unfaithful to the Lord, but the Lord in grace keeps seeking out Israel and calling them back to faithfulness. Hosea in his word:

'I desire mercy, not sacrifice' was warning his contemporaries about a religious attitude that was reduced to keeping the external rules at the expense of being merciful.

In calling Matthew, Jesus demonstrates the quality of mercy and loving-kindness to which Hosea refers; it is the mercy and loving-kindness that derives from God, as exemplified in Jesus's statement: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Jesus operates on a completely different basis than do the Pharisees; Jesus operates on the basis of *grace*. But operating on the basis of *grace* is *risky*. Would Matthew, a sinner in the eyes of the law, become a disciple, who, like those whom Jesus commends in the beatitudes, hungers and thirsts for the righteousness that only God can give? Matthew did; Judas, in the end, did not.

For us today, to live in reliance upon God's grace is risky. It seems much safer to keep the rules and to stay away from bad company, which was the Pharisees' strategy. For us today, to ask in each situation "What is the most merciful thing to do?" is demanding. It is little wonder that legalism—keeping the rules—with its certainties and its black and white distinction between good and bad, holds such an attraction. To show someone mercy means to try to begin to understand him or her; and that is difficult to do if you are repelled by him or her.

God is gracious and shows us mercy because, despite our sin, he loves us and wants us to be his covenant partners. It is this same grace and mercy and love that Jesus extends to Matthew, despite his being a sinner, that is, someone who habitually contravenes God's law. It is that same grace and mercy and love that Jesus extends to *all* people, despite *all* people being sinners. As the Apostle Paul writes; "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8) And as the author of

Ephesians writes: "God is rich in mercy, and because of his great love for us, he brought us to life with Christ when we were dead because of our sins; it is by grace you are saved." (Eph. 2:4-5)

Grace is the determination of God, irrespective of any worthiness on our behalf, to make an enduring commitment to love us and be merciful to us. It is like the determination that a new parent makes to a baby daughter or son in advance of knowing what kind of child or adult she or he will turn out to be; the determination to love and support her or him no matter what. But, as we know, such love and support does not, or it least it should not, mean that we as parents tolerate bad behaviour. Rather, it means that *because* we love our children we expect that they will not do those things that damage them or other people. That is why most of us are not *libertines*. That is, we don't say 'Darling, if it feels good, do it, regardless of what effect it has on others.' For to have such a libertine attitude would be an abuse of grace, just as legalism is a denial of grace.

Both legalism and libertinism are wrong-headed in as much as both are ultimately *centred on self* and not on God. The legalist asks: 'How can *I* be right with God?' Generally the legalist decides that keeping the rules is the way to be right with God. Do you see what has happened? Keeping the rules has interposed itself between the person and God. The legalist is no longer relying on God's grace and asking the question: 'What is the most merciful thing that God would have me do?' but is relying upon keeping the rules. The libertine asks: 'How can *I* feel good about *myself*?' Feeling good about oneself becomes the main focus. In so far as the libertine focuses on those things that make her or him feel good, she or he forgets about God and God's grace.

One of the problems about these wrong-headed approaches is that they both stop the *flow and exchange of grace*. Grace is God's gift of life and loving-kindness in Jesus Christ that is to be received with gratitude and then passed on to others. This is how grace multiplies: when we receive it and pass it on to others it keeps on growing. This is God's *economy of grace* and it is superabundant. The problem with legalistic and libertine attitudes is that they both *stop* the flow and exchange of grace. One takes the attitude: 'Because you've broken the rules you are not worthy to receive grace.' The other takes the attitude: 'Grace makes me feel good about myself. That's all I need to know.'

Is the main division in the Church today not a division based on denomination or tradition but the division based on a tendency towards legalism or a tendency towards libertinism? This would be one way of understanding some of the disagreements and divisions between churches and within churches over particular social issues today. When we think about these as *tendencies*, we might acknowledge that each of us, depending on circumstances, may find that sometimes we tend towards legalism and at other times tend towards libertinism.

What I hope might help all of us is if we could try to find some common ground on which we *can* agree. I hope we can agree that Jesus is God's grace in person. This is why Jesus did not have to ask Matthew: 'Are you good enough to follow me?' but could simply say: 'Follow me'. Because Jesus is God's *grace in person* he is able to extend this gracious call to anyone regardless of whether they are especially worthy or not. So also the Church offers and proclaims *Jesus Christ* as God's grace in person to *all* regardless of worthiness. Not all

respond to it, yet some do respond with faith and gratitude and become Christians.

This is why I take the view I do on certain social issues. I realise that I am something of a puzzle to some of you when I claim to have a high view of the Scriptures and yet take views that seem to go against parts of the Scriptures. It is because I really believe in *grace alone (sola gratia)*. That is, I believe that God's grace in Jesus Christ alone is sufficient to save a person. All that is necessary to receive this grace is *faith alone (sola fide)*. I believe that the only thing that checks my own tendency towards either the legalistic or the libertine is when I receive God's grace in Jesus Christ with gratitude and then pass it on—without conditions—to others.

Thanks be to God.