

Lesson 4

The Motivation for Good Works Is Admiration for Jesus, Not Judgment

It seems there's been a pretty nasty spat between certain leaders of the Gospel Coalition and Tullian Tchividjian. Tullian is both the grandson of Billy Graham and the well-known pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The Gospel Coalition has accused Tullian of 'heresy' due to his belief that the "the Law of God" is of no use to Christians in terms of their progressive holiness (i.e., 'sanctification,') and they have removed Tullian from their organization. The Gospel Coalition, in my opinion, has just made a huge mistake. The mistake is not only that they removed Tullian; they seem not to realize this 'sanctification debate' is centuries old, and previous Law-oriented men who 'booted' grace men from fellowship found r their organizations died a slow death.

Tullian Tchividjian (pronounced tul-ee-un cha-vi-jin) believes that the Law was never to be the motivation or standard for change in a Christian's life. Tullian teaches that God's Law was designed to reveal humankind's defects and o shine a bright spotlight on the beautiful character and work of Jesus Christ. Most importantly, the Law (like the old Greek schoolmaster) leads people to the Teacher (Jesus Christ), where they hear the ultimate good news that God loves defective people and gave His Son to make them completely holy in Him. Author Brennan Manning, who died last year, held to the same beliefs of Tullian. Brennan wrote a powerful book called *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, where he describes the power of understanding this grace principle in layman's terms.

However, Gospel Coalition leaders believe Tullian is an 'antinomian' (i.e., 'a lawless person'). They have unsuccessfully sought to 'correct' Tullian (as if they are on God's side). After 'great sorrow,' the Gospel Coalition has removed Tullian from their organization. They have called their disagreement with Tullian "the sanctification controversy."

Though I'm tinged with sadness that such a wonderful gospel preacher as Tullian is deemed 'unfit' for the Gospel Coalition, I am touched by the humor that certain Gospel Coalition preachers act as if this sanctification controversy is 'recent.' Disagreement over the proper use of the Law of God is as old as the New Testament. Further, three hundred years ago, pastors in England and Europe nearly came to physical blows over this exact same disagreement. Some 18th-century evangelical pastors wound up publicly calling opponents "Pharisees," or 'bastards,' or sometimes even worse expletives. It makes the modern controversy between the Gospel Coalition and Tullian look like a Sunday School picnic.

The Issues at Stake

For the record, I land squarely on the side of Tullian in this debate. In fact, I don't believe you are really preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ until someone calls you an antinomian. The Apostle Paul himself was accused of being 'lawless' (see Romans 6:1). What is interesting is that when he defended himself against the charge, he gave more good news in Christ and never even mentioned the Law. Most Christians today, contrary to Paul, would mention the 'balance' between Law and grace. "We Christians must strike the right balance between law and grace to prevent us from falling into either the trap of legalism or the trap of license," they might say.

Nope, says the Apostle. No balance at all is needed. It's the gospel; it's good news. That's what we need, and we need more of it! We are broadcasters (and hearers) of good news. We don't make the good news; we marvel at it. We don't become the good news; we are blessed by it. We who've come to Christ and have been found 'in Him,' will go through dark spells of discouragement and disobedience where we question if we are His children. Invariably, well-meaning people will try to help us with an emphasis on law, or on our promises to reform, or others 'helps' associated with our self-efforts. But what we need more of is the good news of Jesus Christ when we are struggling.

The good news of Jesus Christ both justifies and sanctifies. The moment that we begin to believe our obedience to Law, that our efforts and striving to conform to Law, somehow makes us more holy, the further we move away from the gospel. Jesus Christ makes us completely holy by His work, not ours. Justification is the declaration of righteousness by God for sinners through His grace in Christ. Sanctification is the application of that justification in the life of the sinner by the work of the Holy Spirit. The sinner is transformed by beholding the glorious grace and beauty of God in loving and saving sinners through the person and work of Jesus Christ (II Cor. 3:18). Note how in this II Cor. 3:18 verse, the transformation of the believer comes from 'beholding Christ,' not by striving hard to obey or promising to do so.

Lest you think this is just some kind of preacher talk, ask yourself these questions:

- (1). Is God 'angry' with the Christian when he or she sins?
- (2). Does the pleasure of God abide upon His people because of their spiritual performance?
- (3). Does God 'see' sin in His people in terms of His judicial wrath and 'punishment'?
- (4). When does the believer enter into 'union with Christ' from God's perspective?
- (5). What is the evangelical motivation for doing good works?

I could go on, but the truth is, how you answer each of these questions--and dozens more--will determine which side of the sanctification 'debate' you take. Let me illustrate this from history.

Men of Grace from the 18th Century

Rather than go into specific details and anecdotes of a similar debate between evangelical ministers three hundred years ago (the 1700s), I recommend you read this excellent online summary of the conflict. If you don't have the time, the arguments back then were much the same as they are today.

I want to show you who it was in the 1700s that held to the same positions on Law and grace that Tullian Tchividjian does (as well as I and thousands of others).

(1). William Gadsby (1733-1844) - Gadsby so opposed the use of "the Law" for the sanctification of God's people that he started a magazine, along with his son John Gadsby, to help Christians understand that the GOSPEL is their STANDARD of living (it's called The Gospel Standard Magazine). My Christian life has been thoroughly enriched from reading William Gadsby's magazine articles, and by memorizing some of the extraordinary Gadsby Hymns, a collection of wonderful songs saturated with the good news

of God's grace and love in Jesus Christ. Gadsby understood, as do I, that we will only love other people more when we more fully comprehend God's love for us; we will only forgive others more easily when we comprehend more fully God's forgiveness of us, etc...

By the time of his death, William Gadsby had planted nearly forty churches. He was once called "a preacher made on purpose for the working classes." Gadsby loved to speak of Christians as "them that are sanctified" (notice the past tense). Without a doubt, Gadsby knew every Christian would enter valley times when doubts about their true spiritual condition would occur, but the solution to such dilemmas is found in one of *Gadsby's Hymns*, Number 283

Breathing after Love to Christ

- 1 'Tis a point I long to know,
(Oft it causes anxious thought),
Do I love the Lord, or no?
Am I his, or am I not?

- 2 If I love, why am I thus?
Why this dull and lifeless frame?
Hardly, sure, can they be worse
Who have never heard his name.

- 3 Could my heart so hard remain,
Prayer a task and burden prove,
Every trifle give me pain,
If I knew a Saviour's love?

- 4 [When I turn my eyes within,
All is dark, and vain, and wild;
Filled with unbelief and sin,
Can I deem myself a child?

- 5 If I pray, or hear, or read,
Sin is mixed with all I do;
You that love the Lord indeed,
Tell me, is it thus with you?

- 6 Yet I mourn my stubborn will
Find my sin a grief and thrall;
Should I grieve for what I feel,
If I did not love at all?]

- 7 Could I joy his saints to meet,
Choose the ways I once abhorred,
Find at times the promise sweet,
If I did not love the Lord?

8 Lord, decide the doubtful case;
Thou who art thy people's Sun,
Shine upon thy work of grace,
If it be indeed begun.

9 Let me love thee more and more,
If I love at all, I pray;
If I have not loved before,
Help me to begin today.

(2). Robert Robinson (1735-1790) author of the great hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing." Robert Robinson had little use for any Christian whose theology led him to be 'intolerant' or 'unloving.' He believed that the grace of God in Christ should teach all men everywhere to "love one another even as Christ loves us" and to be gracious toward all those in error, whether it be behavior or belief. That doesn't mean one does not turn over criminals, abusers or molesters to civil authorities. Quite the contrary, the most loving thing one can do criminals is to turn the 'lawbreakers' over to civil authorities. In the spiritual realm, however, one always move toward believers in Christ caught up in sin with an emphasis on the grace of God in Christ for sinners. In Law oriented churches, Christians desire synods, juries, and judgments against fellow Christians, extracting promises from the sinner that he or she will perform better in the future. Robert Robinson believed that only reminders of the grace and blessings of God in Christ will truly change people. Listen to his fourth stanza in the hymn Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.

4. O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

(3). William Huntington (1745-1813) is the man who preached to the Queen of England as well as the Prime Minister, and signed his letters William Huntington, S.S. (Saved Sinner). My dear friend Dr. George Ella wrote the definitive biography on the life of Huntington while recuperating in the hospital from a severe head injury. Dr. Ella was a linguist who spoke over two dozen languages, but he could only speak English after his head injury. He wrote *Huntington: Pastor of Providence* as a form of rehabilitation, but Ella's book profoundly impacted my life when I read it. I finished it in one sitting, picked up the phone, and tracked down George Ella, and from that day until this, I have had not only a friendship with George Ella, but a deep love for Huntington.

William Huntington taught that the moral law was binding on the nonbeliever but was not a rule of life for the Christian. He put it like this:

"The unbeliever is under the law to Christ. The believer is under grace to Christ"

Huntington believed in a sanctification that comes from the mental and thought life, which ultimately transforms the way a person lives (i.e. 'proper belief leads to appropriate behavior'). Huntington taught that sanctification was the guarantee of God's promise and this gracious promise was the cause of a believer's obedience, for as the believer realized the faithfulness of God to do what He says He will do in Christ, the believer is transformed.. Sanctification, he wrote, "Is willed and determined by the secret counsel of God; and as it is written, "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification" (1 Thess 4:3). Huntington denied what was commonly called 'progressive' sanctification, preferring instead to always speak of 'complete sanctification' in Christ, but a 'growth in grace and the knowledge thereof' whereby Christians enter into a deeper understanding of what Christ has accomplished for His people. It's like being the child of a King and being told: "Go out, son, and live like who you are!" Ella describes Huntington's views on the Law of God for the believer on page 160 of Huntington: Pastor of Providence:

"For Huntington the only rule of conduct for a Christian is the whole will of God centered in Christ... we must talk of God's everlasting love, blessed redemption, all-conquering grace, mysterious providence, the Spirit's work in our souls and a whole host of other good news themes."

(4). John Gill (1697-1791) the greatest theologian, Hebrew linguist, and biblical commentator Baptists in England have every produced. He was called "Dr. Voluminous" because of his prolific writings. Gill pastored in London for over fifty years (1720-1771), and mostly through his influence, saw a return to orthodox Christianity throughout the city after a season of deism had infiltrated the churches. William Cathcart, the great church historian, said of Gill: "It is within bounds to say that no man in the eighteenth century was so well versed in the literature and customs of the ancient Jews as John Gill." Augustus Toplady, a contemporary and friend of John Gill as well as the author of the hymn Rock of Ages, called Gill "the greatest defender of the doctrines of grace since Augustine."

Gill the first person in the history of Christianity to write a verse-by-verse commentary of the entire Bible from the original languages before he ever wrote a systematic theology. Yet, in my estimation, the greatest book ever written by John Gill was actually a lengthy letter that was later published and entitled God's Everlasting Love to His Elect. In it, Gill writes:

"Though God sees sin in his people (in terms of his omniscience) yet He sees no sin in them (in terms of His justice), as they are perfectly justified. In other words, though He sees sin in His people with his eye of omniscience, yet He sees no sin in them with His eye of revenging justice; though He sees in respect of His providence, which reaches all things, yet He sees not sin in His people in respect of justification; though He takes notice of His people's sins so as to chastise them in a fatherly way, for their good; yet He does not see them, take notice of them, and observe them in a judicial way, so as to impute them to them, or require satisfaction for them: God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them (2 Cor. 5:9): No, He has imputed them to Christ, He has beheld them in him, He has charged them to him, and Christ has made full satisfaction for them; and therefore who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth: Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died (Rom. 8:33, 34). God will not require satisfaction at the hands of His people for their sins; He

will not punish them on the account of them; they shall never enter into condemnation; for there is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit (Rom. 8:1). Was God to see sin in His people in this sense, and proceed against them in a forensic way, He must act contrary to His justice and set aside the satisfaction of His Son."

(5) J.C. Philpot (1802-1869) the Oxford educated pastor who became known as "The Seceder" because he resigned from the Church of England in 1835 and became a Baptist pastor. While with the Church of England he was a Fellow of Worcester College, Oxford. After becoming a 'grace man' in the Baptist tradition, he also became the editor of the Gospel Standard. Like other 'grace men' in his day, Philpot believed the law could be used to convict sinners, but it was an entirely inadequate standard for Christian obedience, for it lacked all the spirit and soul of grace and truth. J.C. Philpot wrote of his goal in ministry:

"My desire is to exalt the grace of God; to proclaim salvation alone through Jesus Christ; to declare the sinfulness, helplessness and hopelessness of man in a state of nature; to describe the living experience of the children of God in their trials, temptations, sorrows, consolations and blessings." - J. C. Philpot

One of the things you will find with all grace men in the 18th century and in the 21st century is the belief that acknowledging failure is a virtue in the Christian life. It is only through failure and sin that the beauty and grace of Jesus Christ is really felt.

Philpot understood and communicates in his writings, that law-oriented churches and people cover. They hide. Law-oriented churches, pastors and people so heavily concentrate on 'striving to allegedly rid themselves of sin,' that they are either driven to pride because they think they have succeeded or they are driven to hiding because they can't let others know they have not actually succeeded in dying to sin.

Grace-oriented people who love the gospel understand that grace is only for sinners. Therefore, transparency, honesty and openness are irreplaceable virtues in the kingdom of God. It is only when a sinner feels, acknowledges, and owns his (or her) sin, that the good news of Jesus Christ and all the promises that are "yes" in Him come to life! And yet, the more sin abounds, grace abounds all the more!

Conclusion:

I have never met Tullian Tchividjian. One of these days I hope to be able to fellowship with him. I know some of the Gospel Coalition men by reputation and am friends on Facebook with a few of them. I do hope that they understand by kicking Tullian out of their fellowship they have gone down the same path some Law-oriented evangelicals went in the 1700's when they booted from fellowship some amazing 'grace' men (see above). The 'downgrade' of the gospel began occurring about that very same time in those Law-oriented churches in England and Europe.

It is only God's grace in Christ, the truly good news, that safeguards the church.