



Stephen N. Johnson

THE MYSTERY AND MIRACLE OF MERE GRACE

It is as if I have never sinned and have done everything God ever commanded.

This is the radical, unbelievable, outlandish declaration of God on all who have faith in Jesus Christ. This is the mystery and miracle of mere grace.

A mystery is something inexplicable by natural reason, something beyond human comprehension. A miracle is something that happens only by divine intervention.

I have just come across one of the clearest and most marvelous expressions of the heart and core of the truth Jesus “explained” (John 1:18) to us. It is found in The Heidelberg Catechism* written in 1563. Catechisms consist of questions followed by the answers, each phrase notated with the sustaining Scriptural references. The sixtieth question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism says:

Q. 60. How art thou righteous before God?

A. Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; so that, though my conscience accuse me, that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil; notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me, the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin: yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me; inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.

What an outstanding expression of the gospel!

The gospel is full of paradox. I have “grossly transgressed all the commandments of God,” yet it is “as if I never had had, nor committed any sin.” This is the mystery and the miracle of the gospel. I want you to know, understand, and believe this life-transforming truth.

Being “righteous before God” begins with the confession of sin. There is a reason: if we regard sin casually, we will never regard grace seriously. A frivolous view of sin leads to a frivolous view of salvation and a frivolous relationship with God. Matters of faith are never frivolous.

We have “grossly transgressed all the commandments of God.” It is not that we have committed an occasional peccadillo or an incidental *faux pas*. Our past transgressions are abhorrent, and we are “still inclined to all evil.” Do you

doubt either? The Apostle Paul knew it was so. Read his blunt confession in Romans 7:15-24.

In spite of our sins and our sinful nature, “notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine...” This can be offensive to those who have given years of service to God and the church. “You mean to tell me that all my years of service, all the time and effort I have given, all the self-discipline and denying of my flesh, and all the money I have shelled out, account for nothing?” Right. It accounts for nothing. Any thoughts to the contrary reveal the subtle belief that we can earn our salvation by our service.

How then are we “righteous before God?” “Only of mere grace.” Don’t rush over the word “mere.” It doesn’t take great grace, matchless grace, exceptional grace, or extraordinary grace. God’s *mere* grace is sufficient to cover the grossest sins and our continued, unrelenting, inescapable inclination “to all evil.”

What follows next is the mystery and a miracle of the gospel. It is a paradox.

Despite our gross transgressions and continued inclinations to all evil, “God... grants and imputes to me, the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ.” The heart of the entire gospel is here.

Grant means “the act of giving or transferring by deed.” Impute means, “credited to another person.” God gives, transfers, credits to us all the deeds of Christ. He credits to us “the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ.”

Understand what this statement says: God is as satisfied with you and me as He is with Jesus. How can that be? My conscience accuses me of all that I have done and said, much less the thoughts of my heart. How is it that God is satisfied with the likes of me? This is part of the incomprehensible mystery of Christ that defies human understanding. The Good News is that God grants and imputes to His redeemed the very same delight He finds in Christ. This is the *mystery and miracle of mere grace!*

Similarly, God “grants and imputes to me, the... righteousness and holiness of Christ.” This means that I am as righteous and as holy as Christ. If redeemed, so are you!



How can God do that? Again, I know my deeds, words, and thoughts. He, too, knows my “animalistic sins” and my “diabolical sins” (C. S. Lewis’ terms for the sins of the body and of the heart respectively). Yet, by the *mystery and miracle of mere grace*, God “grants and imputes to me the *perfect* satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ.”

Unbelievable! Yet there is more.

“Even so, as if I never had had, nor committed any sin.” Here again is a paradox: though we have “grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them and (are) still inclined to all evil,” it is as though we “never had had, nor committed any sin” at all.

It is as though I had never broken a single commandment, as though my lips had never spoken a sinful word, as though my thoughts had never entertained seething hatreds, pondered revenge, regretted missing a sassy rejoinder, or indulged lustful fantasy. It is as though not one time in my life had I ever committed a single act of sin. This is more than sins forgiven. It is as if no sins were ever there to be forgiven. God relates to me “as if I never had had, nor committed any sin” in all my life.

God sees us, thinks of us, relates to us as if we are as sinless as Christ.

How can this be? This is the *mystery and miracle of mere grace*.

Yet the mystery and miracle continue:

It is “as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me.” My entire life is as though I—the one whose conscience accuses and condemns—have achieved everything asked of me by God and had fulfilled all His commandments. It is as though, throughout all my life, I have been as obedient to God as Jesus. All—don’t rush over the “all”—that Jesus accomplished in His perfect obedience is now granted and imputed to me.

How can this be? This is the *mystery and miracle of mere grace*.

How does this *mystery and miracle of mere grace* become mine? Become yours?

“In as much as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.”

The answer begins and ends with an appeal to faith. “All” is ours if only we believe it. Belief, faith, means to simply accept the truth of whom God is, that He is the kind of God Jesus “explained” to us. Faith means accepting the truth that God is

a God of grace who has already accomplished in Christ all that needs to be accomplished, and now He gives it all to us as a free gift (Romans 3:24). Faith means that we accept that God is the kind of God who does what the sixtieth Q & A of the Heidelberg Catechism says He does.

Oh, that I would believe this! Like the man who responded to Jesus, I, too, say, “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

This is the gospel, the “good news.” This is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). If we could only believe the gospel, it would transform our lives.

Christ and His Gospel is God’s Christmas gift to all humanity.

No wonder we sing, “Gloria in Excelsis Deo!”

Grace to you.

Steve Johnson

*For more details on the Heidelberg Catechism see: <http://www.creeds.net/reformed/Heidelberg>

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