

Pitching Tabernacles

– Finding Connections Between Obedience and God's Grace

*Because of his very acuteness, he overlooked the point.
—Erubin, 90*

What is the first commandment?

Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism see it differently...

"Why does the Talmud teach that Jews should begin counting the commandments with "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt," instead of beginning with, "You shall have no other gods before Me" as the Protestant Christians do? After all, this Jewish version is not really a commandment at all; it is more a statement of fact." (TGAM)

- ▶ How does God preface the Ten Commandments in **Ex 20:1-3**?
- ▶ How does God preface his promise that Israel will be His "treasured possession" in **Ex 19:4-6**?
- ▶ Why does the Talmud teach a different first commandment? Do you think this is a good idea?

Does the doctrine of God's grace divide us?

Before continuing this discussion let's define our terms...

Grace "The word "grace" in religious contexts means 'undeserved favor.' It is the idea that God takes the initiative in establishing a peaceful, harmonious relationship with me in spite of the fact that I do not deserve his forgiveness."

Mercy "Grace is related to the concept of mercy, but it is different, because mercy involves simply withholding a punishment I deserve..."

Works "...in the Christian lexicon, "works" is the idea that I can reach reconciliation with God by being good enough or obedient enough to earn his forgiveness."

- ▶ How does grace differ from mercy?

Rabbinic Jews on grace...Consider the following quotes from Rabbinic sources:

In the psalm we read: "How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart by day." As long as I take counsel in my soul, there must be sorrow in my heart all day. Only when I know of no further counsel that can help me, and I give up taking counsel, and know of no other help but God, will help be vouchsafed me. (Martin Buber Martin Buber's Ten Rungs: Collected Hasidic Sayings (New York: Citadel Press, 1995), pp. 19–20.)

When all the materials of the tabernacle and its appurtenances had been got together, the Israelites tried in vain to set it up. They then asked Moses to set it up, but he was unable to do so. He then turned to God and said, "I do not know

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The Gospel according to

MOSES

(continued)

how to set it up. "Try again," God replied, "and before long you will find that the tabernacle will set itself up, as it were." (Talmud, Tanhuma on Exodus 39:33)

- ▶ What is the typical Christian understanding of Rabbinic Judaism's belief about grace and works? Where does this understanding come from? (Hint: see **Mt 23:13-26**)
- ▶ What is Martin Buber's message in the first quote above? What is the Talmud's message above? What do these messages have in common?

Compare the following Rabbinic and Christian commentaries on **Ge 15:6**:

...you will find that our father Abraham only inherited this world and the World-To-Come by virtue of faith; as it is said, "he believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness." (Mechilta on Genesis 15:6)

Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." (James 2:21-23, quoting Ge 15:6) NIV

- ▶ Which quote above defends the need for faith and grace? Which defends the importance of works? Which one sounds more Jewish? Which sounds more Christian?
- ▶ What have you learned about Rabbinic Judaism's perspective on "grace"?

The Torah on grace...Some view the Hebrew Scriptures as the part of the Bible that focuses on wrath and judgment, and the New Testament as the part that speaks of grace, but...

"...even a casual reading of the Torah turns it [grace] up again and again. For example, consider the Lord's explanation for choosing Israel:

"Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people. (Dt 9:6) NIV

"Bracketing these words are a number of verses stating that Israel is being given the Promised Land because the people living there are evil, yet here God says that Israel is not righteous either, in fact they have a serious pride problem (they are "stiff necked"). So...Did he find some admirable characteristic in them that the others lacked? No. On the contrary:

"The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt." (Dt 7:7-8) NIV

(TGAM)

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- ▶ What is the connection between God's decisions to rescue Israel, and to send Jesus? (Hint: compare **Dt 7:8** to **John 3:16**) What insight does this add to our concept of "grace"?

The New Testament on works...Sometimes it seems like Christianity is the "works-based" religion...

"So where is the famous debate between Judaism and Christianity over grace versus works? The Talmud's statement "Abraham only inherited this world and the World-To-Come by virtue of faith" is hardly indicative of a legalistic Jewish religion. And...reading on in the New Testament, I find Jesus warning his followers again and again that we are expected to live obedient lives. For example:

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."
(Jesus, in Mt 7:21) NIV*

"Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching..." (John 14:23) NIV

"When Jesus spoke about his "teaching" here, he probably used the Hebrew word torah or its Aramaic equivalent, since torah is the word for both "teaching" and "law." In other words, Jesus is saying, 'If you love me, you will obey my Torah.'" (TGAM)

Christians aren't the only ones with stereotypes. Many Jews believe Christianity teaches salvation through grace alone, with a resulting freedom to ignore God's will. The two quotes above seem to contradict that stereotype. But note in the first quote Jesus is speaking about those who "will enter," not those who "can."

- ▶ In the Matthew quote above, does Jesus say we can enter heaven *without* being obedient?
- ▶ Does Jesus say we must be obedient to enter heaven?
- ▶ How might the difference between the two questions above explain the stereotypical Jewish understanding of Christianity? (Hint: refer back to the **John 14:23** quote again.)