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Jesus: Greater than the Works of the Law

by Gary Wilkerson | September 3, 2012

The opening chapter of Hebrews repeats a truth every Christian knows but that few of us actually grasp: "Jesus is greater." The writer is so focused on this theme he doesn't take time to offer a greeting. He doesn't give his readers any instructions, as some epistles do. Instead, he has one thing on his mind: "Jesus is greater!" He is enamored, thrilled and overcome with Christ.

"Jesus is greater than what?" you may ask. Hebrews 1 answers: He's greater than all the prophets, priests, kings and angels. You name it, and he's greater than that. This isn't news to us who know Christ as our living Savior, as being present at Creation, as ruling eternally as King. He is greater than all that we can imagine.

And yet many Christians stumble over a simple truth when it comes to knowing that "Jesus is greater." The problem is this: Jesus is greater than the works of the law—but we live as if our works mean more than Christ's saving grace. We claim we're saved by his grace, but whenever we fail we fall back on works to be restored. This is an Old Covenant mentality, one that leads to slavery—but yet few of us realize we fall into it.

Hebrews 8 speaks of the "greater covenant" that God made with us in mind: "Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises... 'Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant...' " (Hebrews 8:6,8).

We're told God's New Covenant is greater than all the previous ones he made with man. In those covenants, man always failed to hold up his end of the agreement. This was true even of servants who were close to God's heart. Moses went into a rage and broke the stone tablets God had given him. David—a man who loved God's law, who said it tasted like honey on his lips—committed adultery and then had a man murdered to cover it up. These servants were all giants of faith, yet every one of them failed miserably.

Now a greater covenant was coming. What made it greater? God designed this covenant so it could never be broken. You see, it was a covenant made not between God and man, but between the Father and the Son. Therefore it was a guaranteed surety because neither the Father nor the Son would ever break it. Most amazing of all, the blessings that flowed to Christ for his part of the covenant would be our blessings as well. This is known as "covenant grace."

Still, talk of a "greater covenant" raises questions: Were God's original covenants flawed or badly constructed? And was it harsh of God to hand down to us such laws, knowing they were beyond our ability to fulfill?

According to Hebrews, the law worked perfectly to fulfill its purpose.

God's law worked perfectly for what it was meant to do. Hebrews tells us, "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?" (Hebrews 2:1-3).

The law that God delivered to man "proved to be reliable." Yet this seems like a paradox. If this law was impossible for any person to keep, how could it be reliable? First of all, the law was never meant to be the means of our salvation. It was meant to show us our need for salvation. And the law reliably did that. Time after time Scripture reveals how miserably man failed to keep God's law.

Yet note something else in this passage. Once again, the writer uses the word "great" to describe what Jesus has done. Christ has made the perfect covenant with the Father, one that works to secure "such a great salvation" (2:3). Talk about something reliable—this salvation is designed to work in our lives. In fact, it does what the law itself couldn't do: It saves and frees! Christ's gift of salvation sets us free from the law of sin and death. Moreover, the New Covenant of

grace is the power of God at work in our lives. It empowers us to follow his commands with his strength, not our own. "God also bore witness...by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will" (2:4).

With such a great gift of salvation, why would anyone neglect it? Here's why: We are conditioned to respond to laws with works. Even in the realm of faith, we tend to fall back on works. We may give mental assent to being saved by grace, but deep down many of us still believe works are the way to secure God's blessings.

In fact, our minds are conditioned to fall back on law-keeping whenever we fail. This is the conditioning we received as children. There are basic rules in every household: Clean your room. Help clear the dinner table. Don't pull your sibling's hair, put him in a headlock or set loose his pet turtle. This system says, "If you do the right things, you'll get an allowance. If you do the wrong things, you'll be grounded." It's a conditional arrangement based on rewards and punishment, and most parents use it to maintain their sanity.

This system may work well in family life, but not in kingdom life. Yet, since most of us grew up this way, years later we continue to see life through this lens. Whenever we fail in anything, our reflex is to fall back on works. And that includes our walk with Christ. When we read the words "drift away," we think, "That could be me. I could drift away from the Lord by not having my prayer time, or reading Scripture, or tithing. I could drift into laziness and maybe even old sinful habits."

But the writer of Hebrews isn't talking about drifting away from holy practices. He's saying, "You drift away by neglecting to live under God's covenant grace. You keep returning to a covenant of works hoping to achieve grace." Works can never achieve what only the cross could provide. They can't add a single degree of holiness to our lives. Works that are truly holy are the result of God's grace. They're what we do in gratitude, joy and faithfulness because we've been provided "so great a salvation!"

The very things that God intends to be joyous blessings in our lives we often turn into dutiful works.

Think of all these blessed things: intimate prayer with the Lord, reading his wondrous Word, sharing his gospel joyfully. They're all wonderful practices that make for a joyful, fulfilling life. Yet we often make merit-based works out of them—arduous, duty-bound works. By doing so, we neglect "so great a salvation"—a saving grace that does not fail. You see, even when we fail, the New Covenant does not. According to Paul, that truth should set us free, not enslave us.

"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). Throughout this epistle Paul asks believers, "Why would you ever go back to an Old Covenant of works? That system will only re-enslave you. You've been given the New Covenant, which sets you free to love and serve God in perfect liberty."

Paul hammered this home to the Galatians, saying the gospel empowers us in the Spirit through grace. But the Galatians kept trying to live out the gospel through a lens of works. They were convinced, "If I do this, I'll get a blessing. If I don't, I'll get a curse."

We may not see this in ourselves, but we tend to do something similar today. Our attitude is, "I'll do my best to obey God's commands. He'll have to bless me when I do that." But God says differently through the New Covenant: "I have blessed you already, before you even attempt to obey my commands. I also know you can't keep my Word perfectly, so I will empower you to keep it through my Spirit. My grace will be the power behind your works, not your own strength."

This is the core of the gospel: God does it all! Therefore, when we're told to "pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it" (Hebrews 2:1), it doesn't mean we're to pay greater attention to rule-keeping. We're to pay attention to the gospel of grace that has set us free.

Why would anyone not pay attention to "so great a salvation" as this glorious, free gift? I see two reasons for this:

1. Unbelief. Our sinful nature tells us there can't be such a glorious thing as this New Covenant. There must be something we can do to earn our way. We're conditioned to think this way not just by our childhood, but by our willful nature.
2. Pride. Pride says, "I can do this. Just give me one more chance and I'll get it right." If this describes you, it's clear the law has not finished its work in you. Its purpose is to bring you to the place where you realize, "God has to do it all."

You may wonder, “Why the emphasis on this message?”

Most Christians have pressing concerns in their lives— a child who's running from God, a marriage filled with tension, a mounting stack of bills with no money to pay them. Why should you be concerned about falling back into works if you're facing these kinds of problems?

I believe there is no more practical issue than an enslaving mindset of works-over-grace. It has everyday implications because it directly affects how you deal with your problems.

Let's say a young man with a pornography addiction wants to be set free. He also tends to have a works mentality. One night he reads the following passage: “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word” (Psalm 119:9). The young man thinks if he reads his Bible more, he'll find freedom. Next he reads a passage that says, “Pray for one another.” So he joins a men's accountability group and asks them to pray for him.

Through it all, the young man continues to struggle with sin. Over time he begins to loathe himself for it. He continues the godly practices he has in place, but he tells himself, “This just makes me feel more awful. How much more must God feel that way about me?”

All the actions he has undertaken are good things. But in his heart, he's depending on doing those things— on works— to provide the freedom he seeks. Yet his works mentality only drives him further down into bondage and despair. Following after Christ is not works; working to receive what only God can supply by faith is works.

Let's say another young man in the same church struggles with pornography. He prays to God, “Lord, I'm helpless without you— I know that all too well. Yet, I also know that you are my hope. I come to you now, leaving behind my despair and trusting you to do a work in me. I know I need just one thing to overcome this sin: your empowering grace. Let it roll over me now. Otherwise, I'm hopeless.”

This man will be met by God's empowering grace. Why? He has knocked down every barrier preventing him from that grace— all with one simple prayer.

These two examples may not seem very different on the surface. But in the spiritual realm, tectonic plates have shifted. A heart has moved away from the old, enslaving covenant that says, “I have to earn this,” toward a covenant that says, “Your grace drives all my efforts.”

When we come to this point, we'll see God do things in our lives we could never do through our own efforts. I urge you, don't neglect the great salvation you have been given. Turn to Jesus, who is always greater— and whose grace is your strength for everything. Amen!

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