



GUILT AND GRACE

If I'm honest, there were times when I dreaded attending our university Christian Union. We would gather on Thursday lunchtimes in an old panelled room used for storage, secreted behind heavy wooden doors. With winning smiles we would sing and pray. There was great friendliness, even heartiness, but often I left feeling worse than when I arrived. My view of God didn't help. From somewhere I had developed the idea that the Almighty was a cross between a headmaster and a bank manager, constantly imposing impossible standards and only too delighted to catch me out.

I felt I had to pray and worship in acceptable forms and I dreaded mission meetings most of all. I felt there was a tacit implication that all Christians at medical school would inevitably become overseas missionaries. Like many others, I would sit in terrified, tense silence, feeling the inherent pressure of the meeting, I hadn't dared to miss it, but somehow I hoped that I would escape the awful will of God. Preferring colder climates, I believed that God would force me into a tropical rainforest, if only to prove his sovereignty!

You probably already think that I must have had deep-seated problems to come up with such a strange idea of God but I've since discovered that my experience is far from unique. Many Christians do struggle with a sense of slavery, rather than knowing the pleasure of being a son; they practise religion rather than having a living relationship with God.

Since those early days God has been patiently teaching me the reality of what Jesus meant when he said, 'when you are set free, you are free indeed'.¹ My understanding of God has changed. Amazingly, I've since discovered that he accepts us as we are, not as what we should be. I have discovered that there is now *no* condemnation, that

God doesn't accuse us, but is on our side and in our corner, that he is committed to us and has identified with us.²

God's will isn't harsh, vindictive or difficult to understand. How many of us have wrestled in prayer, only to hear him shout that he had already shown us his will! He doesn't try to trick or punish us. His will is not a narrow tightrope from which it is easy to fall. He allows us to move along it at different paces, maybe even pausing and perhaps going in different directions. God is big enough to cope, even when we get it hopelessly wrong. And he knows our hopes, fears, strengths, weaknesses, skills, responsibilities and preferences as well as we know them ourselves. He has shaped each of us for a purpose. This awareness has changed my own self-understanding.

To continually grovel before God about what miserable sinners we are is a travesty of the gospel of grace, and surely denies the reality of the cross. Because of redemption we are privileged sons not defeated sinners.³ Our fundamental natures have changed. The Holy Spirit now lives within us, prompting us; he makes it easier for us to conform to the image of Jesus.⁴ We have moved from guilt to grace. We have been freed from slavery to sin, and set free to love and serve God. And as we really come to grips with the freedom we really have in Christ, then other people we meet, including colleagues and patients, will notice the difference. We will intrigue them. They'll discover what makes us tick, and they'll want what we have.

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references

1. John 8:36
2. Romans 8:1
3. Romans 8:15
4. Romans 8:29, 12:2