

Chapter 9. Grace

Grace applies to all Christian issues. 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 teaches that a pre-conversion divorce and remarriage is not held against the converts by God. In Hebrews 8:12, speaking of Christians, God says that he “will remember their sins no more.” Baptism forgives all that has gone before. Utterly. Completely.⁵⁹

As obvious as this point should be, we get off track when we think of Christian divorces. What if a Christian couple divorces? We reason, surely they should have known better, and so surely God can fairly remember their sin and require them to remain single until death. And yet, Christians are in grace, too. Aren't they? Are there some sins that are covered by baptism but can't be covered later? What does the Bible say?

Fortunately, the Bible answers this question very plainly:

Rom. 5:6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. *7* Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. *8* But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Paul's first point is to show how amazing it is that God would have given his Son for us while we were not yet saved. Jesus died for the ungodly—we were enemies of God! And yet we correctly believe that baptism washes away each and every sin. We are thoroughly and utterly cleansed in baptism.

Now this is true, but Paul's point is that God does this for us *before* we become his children, indeed, while we are his enemies.

9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how **much more** shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! *10* For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how **much more**, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Now Paul drives his point home. If God would forgive his ungodly enemies utterly and thoroughly, how utterly and thoroughly will he forgive his children?! Paul answers the question by twice saying “much more.” We are much more forgiven now that we are God's friends than we were forgiven when we were his enemies. It only makes sense.

⁵⁹ More on this under the topics “The repentance argument,” “The historical argument,” and “The earthly consequences argument.”

Now, if baptism forgives a divorce that occurred pre-baptism, God's good grace, given freely to his children, will *much more* forgive a divorce that occurs after baptism.⁶⁰

But some argue that Christians should know better (and indeed they should). But the conclusion that Christians receive less generous forgiveness due to their better understanding of God's will does not follow. Christians have grace—and grace is of no value if it doesn't work on sin!

Notice that we've traditionally argued this point in terms of whether Christ's laws are binding on non-Christians. Some have contended that because the law of divorce and remarriage doesn't apply to non-Christians, a pre-conversion divorce and remarriage is overlooked at conversion, but that a post-baptism divorce is outside of grace. Others have very hotly contested this view. Of course, the correct approach to Christian doctrine is to speak in terms of the gospel and grace, and not "laws." The question thus becomes: just how extensive is grace? Unless it is contended that divorce is the unforgivable sin, then for those in grace, grace covers the sin.

I have to tell one bit of history to make the point clear. There was a time in early church history when it was taught that forgiveness could not be had after baptism. The "liberals" of the day taught that forgiveness could be had, but only once! This was prevailing doctrine in the Fourth Century and is the probable reason that Emperor Constantine, although converted early in life was not baptized until he was on his death bed.

The notion that forgiveness is harder to come by after baptism than by baptism is heresy. It is an error borrowed from Roman Catholicism, which teaches that grace is mediated by the church and is often denied to its members. This is utterly foreign to the gospel. It was rejected by the Protestant Reformation and by the early Restorers, such as the Campbells and Stone.⁶¹

But I digress.⁶²

⁶⁰ We will address the question of whether repentance is required to be forgiven of sin, and what repentance entails, later.

⁶¹ The Churches of Christ in America are products of the 19th Century Restoration Movement, resulting from a merger of the movement founded by Barton W. Stone in Kentucky, Illinois, and Ohio and the movement begun by Thomas Campbell and his son, Alexander, in western Pennsylvania and present-day West Virginia.

⁶² Here would be a good place to pause to discuss grace in much more detail. The author's views are laid out in considerable detail in *The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace*. These views are somewhat expanded on in his unpublished manuscript *Buried Talents*. It would take too many pages to answer all the questions here, but those two books are pretty thorough.