

## Does Free Grace Teach License?

Those of us who teach that grace is absolutely free are sometimes accused of teaching license or antinomianism. License is the belief that a Christian can do anything he or she wants, including sin, without negative consequences. Antinomianism is the belief that there are no laws for the Christian life.

### **What it means to teach grace as free**

To teach free grace means teaching that grace cannot in any way be earned, merited, worked for, or deserved. In salvation, this means that eternal life or eternal salvation cannot in any way be earned, merited, worked for, or deserved. Therefore, those who teach free grace in salvation reject any conditions of merit, works, or performance attached to the gospel both in its offer and in the new life that results. That is, eternal salvation cannot be obtained by our performance, nor can it be kept by our performance.

### **The accusation of license**

When we teach that there is nothing a person can do to obtain or keep eternal salvation, some accuse us of making good works or faithful conduct totally irrelevant, and thus it is said we teach license and/or antinomianism. The accusation sounds like this: “You are teaching that a person who has believed in Jesus Christ can do anything he or she wants and still be a Christian? The gospel demands obedience and a life that is governed by laws in the Bible. A person who is not obedient or who practices lawlessness was never or cannot continue to be a Christian.”

Such an accusation is in one sense a very good thing. It is evidence that we are teaching grace as it is defined biblically—absolutely free. Being accused of teaching license or antinomianism is not a new charge; the Apostle Paul was evidently accused of the same when he taught that Christians are “not under law, but under grace” (Rom. 6:14; cf. 6:1 and 15), so we are in good company.

The early church fought against those who tried to add the Old Testament law as a principle for eternal salvation and the Christian life (Acts 15; Rom. 3-4; Gal. 2-5). But the early church also fought against those who perverted grace into a license to sin. (Rom. 3:8; 6:1-23; 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23; Gal. 5:13-26; 2 Peter 2:18-19; Jude 4). Those who teach free grace in the biblical sense teach that Christians are no longer under the Old Testament law and they also oppose licentiousness.

### **Not under law but under grace**

That is the pronouncement of the Apostle Paul (Rom. 6:14). He meant that since the Old Testament law was fulfilled by Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:19-25), we do not have to satisfy its commands to obtain eternal salvation or live the Christian life.

That does not mean that we are without any laws. The New Testament speaks of a new law for Christians, the law of Christ, some of which echoes the Old Testament laws (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2).

But unlike the Old Testament law, it is a “law of liberty” (James 1:25; 2:12) which is inscribed on our hearts (Heb. 8:10). The charge of antinomianism would only apply to someone who rejects all laws, those of both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

Under grace we fulfill the law of Christ as we walk according to the Holy Spirit (8:1-11) or walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-25).

## **Why teaching free grace is not teaching license**

First, grace is absolutely free by definition. To put any conditions on obtaining it or keeping it contradicts what grace is. Grace conditioned on our performance ceases to be grace, so there is no other way to teach grace except that it is absolutely free.

Second, while grace is free, it does teach moral responsibility. Grace teaches us to deny ungodliness and live godly lives (Titus 2:11-14). To live under grace means we should live a righteous and holy life (Romans 6-8; Eph. 2:8-10). All grace teachers should teach the moral admonitions of the Bible.

Third, teaching grace should motivate us to live for God who has blessed us freely by His grace. Experiencing and understanding God’s grace should generate a heart and life of worship and gratitude to God for His undeserved free gift (Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:1).

Fourth, those who teach free grace should also teach that believers who sin face God’s discipline. Like a good and loving Father, God does not let His children run wild (Heb. 12:5-11).

Fifth, those who teach free grace should teach that every believer will have to give an account of his or her life before the judgment seat of Christ where there will be both positive and negative consequences. When we die or when Christ comes, we will each face this reckoning that has consequences into eternity (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:10).

## **Conclusion**

We who teach free grace properly do not teach license or antinomianism. We teach that grace is given freely apart from our performance. Grace has freed us from the requirements of the Old Testament law and has placed us under the new law of Christ which we fulfill when we live by His Spirit. Grace liberates us not to serve our own sinful desires, but to serve God and others. Grace can be abused—that is always a risk of freedom—but those who do so invite God’s discipline and other negative consequences. However, when we appreciate the high price God paid for our free gift of eternal life—His only Son—we should have a heart of worship and gratitude that leads to spiritual maturity and godly living.