

**Romans 4:13-17**

**Grace, Faith & Love**

Do you ever find yourself going over old tunes in your head which you learnt when you were very young? If you are about my age, or have children about my age, you may remember a song from the American children's TV show, Sesame Street, from the mid-1970s, 'Which came first, the chicken or the egg?' It is an age-old question; if the egg came first, who laid it, and if the chicken came first where did it hatch from? I remember my brother and I having these kinds of discussions whenever this song would come on, although I'm sure the discussions didn't go too deep or go on very long. A few years ago, I read that one of Sesame Street's underlying philosophies is that every segment it produces has to have a clear educational focus and outcome. I look at a song like this, and think, 'mmm, what are they trying to teach kids here?' Is it that all questions in the world aren't black and white? That cause and effect can sometimes get mixed up? You can't just assume you know what is right? Or were they trying to lead young minds into the beginning of deeper philosophical and theological musings about the meaning of life? Or, maybe all of the above and then some?

Which came first? If you think about it, that's a question we can apply to a whole lot of situations, not just about animals and their offspring. For example: do I love that person because they do that, or do I love them doing that because I love them? Often hard for us to know. And looking at Paul's letter to the Romans overall, and our reading for today in particular, this is a question he is addressing here also. Writing to a very mixed bunch of new Christians, some who had been very strong and observant Jews, some who had come as devout followers of other religions, and some with no religious background or experience at all, Paul is here addressing the question of : 'which comes first, God's grace or God's Law'. In other words, does someone have to work to find favour with God by following His Laws and commands, and so then receive His grace and forgiveness, or, does the grace and forgiveness comes first as a gift, received through faith, and following the laws and commands comes then as a response to that? Which comes first?

What is the balance, the order, the place, that God's gracious love for us in Jesus, and His call to follow His laws in our lives, where does this all sit in our relationship with God, and, following on from that, how we

live our lives? Again, this is the question being addressed in our reading here; what part, and in what order, does God's grace and God's Law play in our being saved? And it is a question for us all; it often comes up among Christians. 'We are saved by what God has done for us, sure, but surely we have to do something as part of that or it's all just cheap and meaningless?'. Both our human nature and our society conditions us to think we have to earn what we receive, or at least work to pay it back. Be cynical of anything which is free. If it's too good to be true, it probably is. 'But wait, there's more!' – what's the catch? And many of the people Paul is writing to here knew God's Laws from the Old Testament. So surely, they reasoned, if even non-Jewish people can now be saved, they must have to first try to follow the rules God's people have been following for a long time. But how does that then fit in with what God has done for us in Jesus? And so, the question is, when it comes to us and our relationship with God, which comes first: following the laws so we can earn and be worthy of God's love, or receiving in faith (a gift of God itself) the grace and forgiveness we are offered through Jesus?

Perhaps part of the problem, and the reason why this has been such a confusing question both for people in the past and still today, is about the way we look at God's Law. Very often, as people, we look at God's laws in the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments and many others, as being about what we might often term the 'fun police'. We might see them as God trying to stop us doing things which are natural, enjoyable, things which we don't see as harming ourselves or others, and so we can easily then write them off as being irrelevant for our time. The other side of this, is that when we look at God's laws as just being about 'do's' and 'do not's', then we can see them as being a kind of 'worthiness' test God is giving us; pass the test and you can enter the Kingdom. If God's laws are only about an attempt to try and control us, or to ensure we are fully worthy of His love, then we will put the Law before God's grace, which is exactly what Paul is writing against here.

The reason that Paul can now turn this around, is that instead of looking at God's Law as being about control, he now sees it as being about love. The commands God gives us are not meant to restrict us, they're not meant as a test so we have to earn what God freely gives to us, God has given them to protect and care for us because He loves us, and so we can now respond in doing these things when we know His love. It's the same as a parent with a young child; that child won't always know and agree with what the parent prevents them from doing, but as they get older they will see their parent's love coming through in these restrictions. The parent doesn't have rules so the child can show they are worthy of the parent's love, but in already loving the child the

parent tries to protect them. And, theoretically anyway, when the child does know and understand that they are loved they will respond in love by accepting that what the parent has laid down as boundaries is good for them. Applying that order of what we receive and what we do to our relationship with God is the point Paul is making here. He uses one of the greats of the Old Testament, Abraham, to show that even he wasn't made right before God because of what he did, but because of the grace he received through his faith. 'Everything depends on having faith in God, so that God's promise is assured by his gift of undeserved grace' (16a) .

God's grace comes to us through our faith, leading to our works of love. There is our order of how now, because of what God has done for us in Jesus, how our relationship with God now works. That can be hard for us; not only the people of Rome 2,000 years ago but possibly many of us today find this hard to balance up. When it comes to our being saved, it's all done for us by God in Jesus. And even the faith that enables us to accept this is a gift from God. Everything, everything, we now do is done as a response to that.

Another point Paul makes in our reading, is that what this order means is that faith allows God's work to work. Faith enables us to receive and accept what God has done for us in Jesus. What does this mean for us in our lives, not as something we have to earn, not as something we have to pay back, but as grace and forgiveness which we freely receive, and value and treasure what difference do they make to us? Like any kind of love, although this one is greater than all, how does knowing how much God loves us, the lengths He was prepared to go to so we could come back to Him, how does that lead us to respond to Him in the life we are called to live?

How do we live out, how do we share, this grace, faith, and love in our lives? How does it change how we respond to God's commands: do we look for ways to get around them or water them down, or do we see them as showing His love for us and wanting to care for and protect us? How do we view other people: if we see every person as someone God loves, whether they know that or not, how does that change how we interact with them, how we accept them, seek to understand them, forgive them? And if knowing God's love, receiving His forgiveness, having new life with Him both now and forever, if this something which is really important for us, how is God calling us to share and witness to this in our lives? In order to show others what God's love means to me, what do I need to let go of? What do I need to hold on to? What do I need to do more of? What do I need

to do less of? It's all about God's grace for me, a gift I receive only in faith. How is the love I receive now reflected in the love I show?

There a number of different ways we can focus on this, and one of them is by praying together the Living Grace prayer we are using here over this time: 'Lord, thank you that in Jesus your love and grace has come into our world and our lives. Help me to live and to love in a way that helps others to know your grace also. Amen.' In many ways what Paul was asking the Christians in Rome to do was take a new look at their relationship with God and what it is based on, and how they then live that out. Lent is a time to take a fresh look, and we can do this by taking time out to read our Bible, praying a prayer like this, praying in other ways; spending time with God to be reminded of both His love for us and His call for us. As we come to know God's love and grace through our faith, we can ask Him to help us share His love so others can know His grace also.

Maybe I've got a bit more of a grip on the 'chicken and egg' question than I had when I was four or five, but there are plenty of similar 'which came first?' questions which can still make me wonder. What we can be sure of though, not just from our reading but from the whole Bible witness, is that when it comes to our relationship to God being restored and us receiving His love, God's grace comes first. We receive this through His gift of faith, and we are called to respond to it in our lives of love. As you, through faith, now know and receive God's love, may He lead you to show this in how you live His love out each day. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- Are there any 'which came first?' questions you sometimes wonder about: eg, the cause of an argument or dispute? Why you love someone? A change in our society? Something in nature? Do any of your questions leave you thinking there is no clear answer?
- In our relationship with God, we are brought back to Him solely through His grace, which we receive in faith. What does this mean to you? How does it change your life? How does it alter the way you live out what you have received?
- If instead of looking at God's Law as being about controlling restrictions, or a worthiness test, we see in those commands God's love and care for us, how does this change how we now view them and seek to live them out?
- The life we live, the love we show, is in response to the grace God has shown to us in Jesus, which we receive in faith. In having a loving response to this, what is God's call now to you in your life? Is there any part of your life in which you feel particularly challenged to live this out?

Prayer: Lord, thank you that in Jesus your love and grace has come into our world and our lives. Help me to live and to love in a way that helps others to know your grace also. Amen.

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