

# “Free Grace” Theology and Matthew 7:21-23

Matt Waymeyer (May 05, 2017; *Used by permission*).

“Free Grace” is the label commonly given to a theological system founded by the late Zane Hodges and currently promoted, among others, by Bob Wilkin and The Grace Evangelical Society. According to “Free-Grace” theology (hereafter FG), genuine conversion does not necessarily result in a spiritually transformed life, for FG advocates affirm that someone can believe in Christ and yet show forth absolutely no fruit whatsoever in terms of obedience to God or love for Christ. Put another way, they believe in a regeneration that may or may not result in progressive sanctification. Most times, they say, it does not.

Many FG teachers would go so far as to say that if someone were to believe in Christ for a fleeting moment and then immediately recant of that belief and live out the rest of his life as a Christ-rejecting atheist who never obeys the Lord, that individual is a true child of God and will some day be in heaven. In other words, rather than recognizing that such an individual did not truly believe in Christ to begin with (1 John 2:19), Free-Gracers would affirm that person’s faith and conversion as genuine, for regeneration is no guarantee that one will persevere in the faith.

Among the many passages of Scripture confront the FG view is Matthew 7:21-23, where Jesus says:

<sup>21</sup> “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ <sup>23</sup> And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

The obvious problem that this passage presents for the FG position is the assertion of Jesus that only those who “do the will of my Father” will enter the kingdom. This runs contrary to the FG gospel, which says that most of those who enter the kingdom will not have lived a life of obedience to God during their lives on earth.

One of the primary ways that FG teachers try to solve this dilemma is by using John 6:40 to interpret “the will of My Father” in Matthew 7:21 (e.g., see Joseph Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 199; Bob Wilkin, *Confident in Christ*, 216). According to this approach, doing the will of the Father in John 6:40 (and thus in Matthew 7:21) refers to believing in Christ. Therefore, the argument goes, Matthew 7:21 simply says that only those who do the Father’s will (which is to believe in Christ) will enter the kingdom of

heaven. And with that, the tension between Matthew 7:21-23 and FG theology is said to vanish.

In contrast, the FG interpretation of Matthew 7:21-23 suffers from three insurmountable difficulties: (1) a neglect of the original context; (2) a misguided hermeneutical approach; and (3) a complete misunderstanding of John 6:40.

### A Neglect of the Original Context

The first problem is that the FG explanation of Matthew 7:21-23 ignores key details in the passage itself. The most obvious one is the contrast that Jesus establishes between those “who [do] the will of the Father” in verse 21 and those “who practice lawlessness” in verse 23 (both present participles in the Greek). Those who do the will of the Father (i.e., live lives of obedience) will enter the kingdom (v. 21), but those who practice lawlessness (i.e., live lives of disobedience) will not enter the kingdom (v. 23). In this context, “doing the will of the Father” most naturally refers to obeying God, and the way it is set in contrast to living a life of disobedience only confirms this interpretation.

Furthermore, there is a clear juxtaposition in which those who *call* Jesus “Lord” do not *obey* Him as Lord. These individuals profess to be followers of Christ who live in submission to God’s authority, and yet they do not live in obedience to the will of the Father. Their lives of disobedience betray the hypocrisy of their confession. As it is often said, they *profess*, but they do not *possess*.

FG theologians respond to this straightforward interpretation of Matthew 7 with two objections. First, they insist that it amounts to a person trusting in his own obedience as the basis for his salvation. In response to this objection, Jesus is not saying that obedience to the Father is the *basis* of the believer’s salvation, but rather the *inevitable result* of it. Only those who obey the will of the Father will enter the kingdom because everyone who truly believes in Christ will demonstrate their faith in the way that they live. Genuine conversion will not fail to result in works of obedience.

This truth is taught throughout the New Testament. As one example, 1 John 2:3 says: “And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.” According to John, we do not come to know Christ *by* obeying His commandments—rather, the evidence that we have *already* come to know Christ (through faith) is that we obey His commandments. In this way, obedience to God is not a *prerequisite* for conversion—it is an *inevitable result* of conversion. FG advocates have a difficult time understanding the difference between the two and therefore reject the latter because they mistake it for the former.

The second objection involves the passage itself. FG teachers point out that the very individuals who are rejected by Christ in verse 23 are described in verse 22 as those who

trust in their obedience as the basis for their salvation. (Verse 22: “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’”) Therefore, the objection goes, whatever Jesus means by “the will of the Father” in verse 21, it cannot refer to a life of obedience to God.

In response to this objection, the works that Jesus describes in Matthew 7:22 are not acts of obedience to the will of the Father. Nowhere does God command the common man to prophesy, cast out demons, and perform miracles. The individuals rejected by Christ claimed to be engaged in these activities—and they may have been—and yet, at the same time, they had not lived lives of obedience to the Father. In fact, just the opposite—they had lived lives of lawlessness. In contrast, only those who do the will of the Father will enter the kingdom.

### A Misguided Hermeneutical Approach

The second problem is a hermeneutical one. The FG view sees John 6:40 as the interpretative key which unlocks the otherwise hidden meaning of Matthew 7:21. There is nothing in the immediate context in Matthew 7 which leads the interpreter to understand “the will of the Father” as faith in Christ, and only when this meaning is imported from John 6:40 does this interpretation emerge. But where does that leave the original hearers’ of the Sermon on the Mount? Without a copy of the Gospel of John in hand, they would be left in the dark, with the true meaning of Matthew 7:21 completely hidden from their eyes.

Furthermore, even if the original hearers *had* possessed the Gospel of John, what would compel them to look to John 6:40 to discover the meaning of Matthew 7:21? FG teachers confidently state that the meaning of “the will of the Father” in Matthew 7:21 can be found in John 6:40, but how do they know that? The whole approach seems to betray a desire to preserve FG theology, but it does so at the expense of the clear meaning of Matthew 7:21-23.

### A Complete Misunderstanding of John 6:40

Thirdly, apart from the aforementioned hermeneutical problem, the FG interpretation completely misinterprets John 6:40. In other words, the FG view not only ignores key details in the immediate context of passage under consideration, but it also uses John 6:40 to import into Matthew 7:21-23 meaning which is not even found in John 6:40! Put simply, the will of the Father in John 6:40 is not God’s will for mankind, but rather God’s will for His Son Jesus. Consider the verse in its context. In John 6:38-40, Jesus says:

<sup>38</sup> For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. <sup>39</sup> This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose

nothing, but raise it up on the last day. <sup>40</sup> For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.

Verse 38 is simple enough: Jesus says He has come to do with the will of the Father. He follows this up in verse 39 by explaining what this will is—that He (Jesus) would lose none of those whom the Father has given to Him, but rather that He would raise up all of these believers on the last day. In verse 40, Jesus elaborates further on what He has said in verse 39 (indicated by the explanatory *gar* [“for”] at the beginning of v. 40) by again explaining the will of the Father for Jesus. The will of the Father, He says, is that all believers will have eternal life (the emphasis being not on the present possession of eternal life but on the future culmination of it). And who is going to make sure they have eternal life? Who is going to accomplish the Father’s will and guarantee this eternal life by raising believers up on the last day? Jesus! As He says at the end of verse 40: “I Myself will raise him up on the last day.” Jesus will indeed accomplish the will of the Father who sent Him, and therein is the hope of the believer.

To summarize, then, the will of the Father in John 6:38-40 is not that people would believe in Christ, but rather that those who do believe would have eternal life and that Jesus would guarantee this by raising them up on the last day. No one whom the Father has given to the Son will perish, because Jesus shall do the will of the Father. Therefore, using John 6:40 to interpret Matthew 7:21 may seem to rescue FG theology from a theological dilemma, but it constitutes a careless handling of the Word of God. If FG teachers are determined to relieve the tension that exists between Matthew 7:21-23 and their theology, they will need to seek some other way to do it. My hope is that they would jettison their theological system altogether.