

INTRODUCTION

Did you hear about the joke about the Baptist pastor who snuck out to the horse race track? He’d never bet on the horses before, so he wasn’t sure where to put his money. Before one of the races he watched as a Catholic priest pronounced a blessing on a particular horse. So he bet all his money on that horse. That horse was leading down the stretch when it suddenly dropped dead on the track. The Baptist preacher was upset and found the Catholic priest. He said, “I bet all my money on that horse because you blessed it.” The priest said, “That’s the problem with you Baptists. You can’t tell the difference between a blessing and last rites.”

For sure, we don’t understand some of the rituals of other churches, and if you’re from another church, you may be confused about why we do or don’t do certain things. You may feel more comfortable genuflecting or kneeling, or having the Lord’s Supper every Sunday. There’s nothing wrong with those things, but when you simply go through the motions of religious rituals you miss the point of the Bible. God isn’t interested in religion. He wants to have a personal relationship with you.

Paul wrote this letter to the churches in Galatia, which is the area of Southern Turkey today. He had started these churches by preaching salvation is by grace alone. But after he left, false teachers came in and started teaching that the cross was not enough. In order to go to heaven, Christians had to obey all the Jewish law as well. You can imagine Paul’s frustration and consternation when he hears about this heresy. He wrote this letter to challenge the believers to reject these false teachers and to stay on the grace-way.

Liberty is a value that is precious to us as Americans. The date was March 23, 1775, and the place was St. John’s church in Richmond, Virginia. The occasion was the Virginia Convention, and the issue was whether or not Virginia should join the other colonies in rebellion against England. The general mood of the delegates was to find a pathway of peace with England. Thomas Jefferson and George Washington were delegates in attendance.

However, eyewitnesses reported when 39-year old lawyer Patrick Henry rose to speak, his speech turned the tide. The entire speech reads like a sermon. At one point, Henry said, “suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss.” But his final words brought the delegates to their feet in support. He said: “If we wish to be free...we must fight! An appeal to arms, and to the God of hosts, is all that is left us... Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God. I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”

Those passionate words caused the delegates to shout in unison, “Give me liberty or give me death!” Paul is just as passionate in his letter to the brothers and sisters in Galatia. However, the choice he points out is between Christian liberty or religious legalism.

Galatians 5:1-4. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the

whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”

Look again at those ten powerful words in verse 1. This is the key verse in the book of Galatians. Would you repeat them after me? “It is for freedom...that Christ has set us free.”

In this message I want to talk about what it’s like to live under the bondage of religious legalism, compared to living under the liberty of God’s grace. Let’s look at three important parts of our lives: Our identity; our ability; and our security.

1. MY IDENTITY

One of the most important questions you’ll ever answer about yourself is: Who am I? Everyone has a self-image. It’s how we see ourselves. Where do you get your sense of identity or worth?

LEGALISM: My worth is based on what I DO or DON’T do

If you are a legalist your self-image rises and falls on how “good” or “bad” you think you are. And some days you’re really good and feel pretty good about yourself. Right now, you probably feel pretty good about your status as a Christian. After all, you got up and came to church while others are heading to the lake. You gave a good offering to the Lord, and you are filling in the blanks on the outline, so you’ve got that going for you.

Those are all good things to do, but if you feel worse about your spiritual status on Monday evening because you didn’t DO those religious things, then you are coming down with a good case of legalism.

However, most legalists don’t feel good about themselves, because they never think they do enough. They are always thinking, “I should have prayed more. I should have read my Bible more. I should have witnessed more today. I’m a pretty awful person, and God is probably pretty disappointed in me right now.” Legalism has robbed them of the joy of their salvation.

The Bible calls Satan “the accuser of the brothers.” (Revelation 12:10) He sneaks up to Christians and whispers, “You’re no good. You’re no good. Baby, you’re no good.” If the devil can keep you feeling bad about who you are, then you’ll never be of much service to God. Have you ever had the following negative thoughts about yourself? “I’m so disappointed in myself.” “What’s wrong with me?” “I just can’t get things together.” “I hate myself.” “I’m worthless.” “I’m a loser.” “My life is a mess.” “I’m a failure.” “I’ll never make it.” Legalism puts you in bondage to a daily performance review. It robs you of the joy of living life in Christ. A legalist is the worst advertisement for the Christian life.

Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., a great Bible teacher describes legalism this way: “Legalism wrenches the joy of the Lord from the Christian believer, and with the joy of the Lord goes his power for vital worship and vibrant service. Nothing is left but cramped, somber, dull and listless profession. The truth is betrayed, and the glorious name of the Lord becomes a synonym for a gloomy killjoy. The Christian under law is a miserable parody of the real thing.”

LIBERTY: My worth is based on who I am in Christ

All of us want to be approved and accepted. The liberty that comes with grace sets me free to realize that IN CHRIST, God gives me His full approval and acceptance. Jesus gave us a great picture of what it means to be IN CHRIST in John 15. He said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

My job today isn’t to try to be good or do good to feel good about myself. My job is stay firmly connected to the Vine, Jesus. And when you are in Christ, when God looks at you, He doesn’t see you in your sinful condition, He views you through the filter of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. If you want to know who you are in Christ, just confess every day what the Bible says about you. Based on the Word of God you can say, “In Christ, I am accepted (Ephesians 1:6); I am a child of God (1 John 3:3); I have been bought with a price and belong to God (1 Corinthians 6:20); I have been chosen by God and adopted into His family (Ephesians 1:3-8); I have been redeemed and all my sins are forgiven (Colossians 1:13); I have direct access to the Throne of Grace (Hebrews 4:14); I am free from condemnation (Romans 8:1); I am hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:14); I am a citizen of Heaven (Philippians 3:20); I am the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19); I am God’s workmanship (Ephesians 2:10) I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me! (Philippians 4:13)

So today, don’t look at yourself based upon how good or how bad you are. See yourself as God sees you—as a born again, blood-bought child who is precious to Him. That kind of self-image sets you free!

2. MY ABILITY

Identity is about who I am, but ability is about what I can do. What’s more important, doing or being? Socrates said, “To do is to be.” John Paul Sartre said, “To be is to do.” Frank Sinatra said, “Do be, do be, do.” So who was right? In the Bible, being is more important than doing. After all, we’re human beings, not human doings. But your view of your ability will be based upon your identity.

LEGALISM: I should have the strength to obey the Bible and to improve myself

There’s a wonderful American value called the work ethic. It’s sometimes called the American dream. It is the belief that if a person works hard enough they will be able to make a good living for themselves and their family. That’s great when it comes to your job, but it produces legalism when you apply that same work ethic to your faith.

Last Monday evening, former Dallas Cowboy, Chad Hennings was the speaker at the FCA Banquet here at our Crosswalk Worship Center. He talked about his work ethic growing up as a wrestler and football player. He believed that if he worked harder than anyone else he could become the best. That attitude worked with football and wrestling. He excelled because he worked harder than anyone else. Unfortunately, he applied the same attitude to his faith. He

believed that if he just prayed enough, gave enough, read the Bible enough, and attended church enough, he would be the best Christian around. He could excel by just working harder than any other Christian. But when his two-year old son, Chase, was at the point of death with a fever, he realized there was nothing he could DO to make him better. He could only trust God. He said that was the turning point of his Christian life, and he turned from legalism to living under God’s grace. Monday night, he didn’t finish his story and never said what ever happened to his son. Several people who were there asked me this week, “What happened to Chase?” I looked online and little Chase survived and is a growing, healthy boy. And now Chad Hennings is living under the freedom of grace rather than in the bondage to legalism.

LIBERTY: I need Someone to guide my life from within (the Holy Spirit)

When we live under the liberty of grace, we admit we are powerless to help ourselves. There’s a reason why that’s the first statement in the 12 steps of AA and in Celebrate Recovery. When a person is in bondage to an addiction, they will remain in chains as long as they try to help themselves. They think, “I can fix this. I can do better. I can live better.” But it’s only when they admit that they are powerless, that they begin the journey to wholeness, healing, and restoration. The same is true about the Christian life.

The idea of the fruit of the Spirit is a foundational principle in the Christian life. It’s such a powerful list of Christian virtues that we have painted each of the nine fruit of the Spirit on the doors leading into the Worship Center. That attitude of legalism is that I ought to be able to display these nine virtues in my own strength and ability. But notice these virtues aren’t the fruit of a Christian, they are the fruit of the Holy Spirit. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

At this point in this study of Galatians, some of you may be thinking, “Pastor, I’ve heard you say for several months that I should stop trying to be good and do good. When are you going to tell me HOW to do that?” Hang on. In five weeks I’ll start a series called “Grace-fruit: Jesus Living in You.” The turning point in my life was when I realized that God didn’t expect me to live the Christian life. Instead He expects me to surrender to Jesus who lives in me. I can’t live the Christian life, but He can. The famous phrase from Ian Thomas about living the Christian life was: “You can’t. God never said you could. He can. He always said He would. So let Him.” When I learned that truth, I found liberty. Have you discovered that?

3. MY SECURITY

How do you know for certain you’ll go to heaven when you die? If you’re a legalist, you can only compare your behavior with those around you. And you live either in pride that you’re better or in fear that you haven’t done enough. But the grace of God gives you security as well as liberty.

LEGALISM: I’m better than most people I know

There are some people who can’t pass a mirror without looking at themselves. And they think, “Oh yeah. I’m looking good.” Legalism is a spiritual version of that. A legalist is always looking at your conduct and comparing themselves to others. Jesus gave a perfect example of a legalist when He told this parable: “The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’” (Luke 18:11-12)

Like that Pharisee, a legalist is someone who gets upset when they see something that doesn’t align with their personal view of Christianity. Worship music is a good example of this. Back in the 1970s a new brand of Christian music emerged, that for lack of a better term was called “Christian Rock Music.” It had a beat, but it also had a Christian message. I know about it because I was a part of it. I was in a music group that used drums, guitars, and even a brass section. We were like a Christian Chicago. We moved around a lot, which some called dancing, but our director called it “sacred liturgical movement.”

A lot of older Christians didn’t like it. There were some churches we played in where people actually got up and left. They didn’t take the time to pay attention to the lyrics; all they thought about was the beat. I recall sermons on how music with a beat was from the devil.

One of my mentors, Ray Stedman, wrote about a group like this that was singing at his church in Palo Alto, California. They were called “The Salt Company.” Ray said one of his elders was disturbed with the music and was considering walking out. But he looked over at his wife, who was the church organist. She had her head bowed in prayer. When there was a break in the music he said, “I see you’re troubled, too. Let’s leave.” She said, “No. I was just talking to the Lord, and He told me that He wasn’t nearly as uptight about this as I was, so we’re staying.” When Ray told that story He would say that’s what repentance is. It’s when we change our attitudes to match the attitude of the Lord.

LIBERTY: I’m a sinner in constant need of God’s grace

I trusted Jesus as my Savior on March 11, 1962. For many years I thought that I only needed God’s grace as an 8-year-old boy to save me. I’ve since learned that God’s grace isn’t a relic from our past, it is our daily manna. I need God’s grace right now to save me. But I’m confident that His grace is enough to cover any sin.

You’ve probably heard the expression, “There but for the grace of God, go I.” Do you know the origin of that phrase? Pastor John Bradford was a Protestant reformer in England in the 16th Century whom seeing prisoners taken to the gallows to be hung, he said, “There but for the grace of God, go I.” That almost became a self-fulfilling prophecy, because he was arrested for his Biblical stand, and was condemned to death. He was led out of the Tower of London and burned at the stake for his faith. But as the flames circled his body he turned to another condemned pastor, John Leaf and said, “Be of good comfort, brother. We shall enjoy a fine supper with the Lord this night.” That’s what I call security!

Chances are good that you’ve heard Jeff Foxworthy talking about how “you might be a redneck.” He’s right when he says he will never run out of material. Some of my favorites are: If you think

a turtleneck is an ingredient in soup, you might be a redneck; If you think the stock market has a fence around it, you might be a redneck. If your wife has ever said, "Come move this transmission so I can take a bath," you might be a redneck.

With apologies to Jeff Foxworthy, I've come up with a list of "You might be a legalist." Here is my top ten.

1. If you've ever hidden anything in your house before the Pastor or other Christians visited, you might be a legalist.
2. If you see the piercings and body art on your waiter and assume they need the Lord, you might be a legalist.
3. If you judge families as either James Dobson or Jerry Springer material based on appearances alone, you might be a legalist.
4. If you think mowing the lawn on Sunday is a sin, you might be a legalist.
5. If you think any Bible translation except the King James Version is sinful, you might be a legalist.
6. If you secretly feel superior in any way to your divorced friend, you might be a legalist.
7. If you've ever felt guilty for only putting \$1 in the offering plate on Sunday, you might be a legalist.
8. If you wonder what others think about your spirituality, you might be a legalist.
9. If you still feel guilty even though you are forgiven, you might be a legalist.
10. If you've ever said, "I know Jesus loves everyone BUT..." you might be a legalist.

And the final one is: If any of these statements make you uncomfortable, or make you a little mad, you might be a legalist.

There's really no exhaustive list of legalism because, like redneck jokes, there's no limit to it.

Since I'm a recovering legalist, I've been exposed to a list of do's and don'ts that are not in the Bible. At one time, I have not only embraced some of these extra rules, I've preached on them. They include Christians going to movies, dancing, "mixed bathing," (that meant boys and girls swimming in the same pool at the same time), watching the Smurfs (they were demonic), reading Harry Potter (that's witchcraft); Listening to secular music; wearing flip flops to church; and playing cards. At my last church in Alabama we had a minister of education who needed people to bring some card tables to a fellowship. But since we didn't believe in Christians playing cards the announcement read: "Please bring your collapsible, square, portable tables and folding chairs." Some people didn't have a clue that we meant "card tables."

There was a time when I even believed and preached that clapping in church was sinful. At one church we had a business meeting and where we were discussing whether to move the time of the Sunday evening worship to 6:00 p.m. from 7:00 p.m. The teenagers wanted the earlier time so they could have their youth fellowship after church, but the older folks wanted to keep it at 7:00, because...well, it had always been at 7:00 since Noah came off the ark. The whole youth group showed up and voted for the 6:00 p.m. time. There were more teenagers than adults, so it passed. When I announced that the vote indicated we were moving our Sunday evening service to 6:00 p.m., the teenagers started clapping their hands. But like an Old Testament prophet I said,

“Hold it right there. As long as I’m pastor, there’ll be no clapping in this church.” And when I said that, guess what happened? The teenagers got quiet, but the older people liked that statement so much that they started clapping!

Later Jess Moody, who was pastor of FBC of Van Nuys, California, told me to loosen up. He showed me Psalm 47:1 that says, “Clap your hands all ye people; shout unto God with the voice of triumph.” He asked me what I was going to do about that verse. And I said, “Hmm.” And since that time I’ve pretty much been clapping my hands off for the Lord!

CONCLUSION

How many of you have seen the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor? The lady standing on the pedestal has a name. Her name is *Libertas*, which means freedom or liberty. She was a gift to the U.S. from the people of France. In 1885, the completed statue was dismantled in France and placed in 214 crates to be shipped to America. Halfway across the Atlantic, the French ship encountered a terrible storm was in danger of sinking. To lighten the ship, the captain ordered that any excess weight be cast overboard. The ship was still in danger of being swamped by the waves. The sailors wanted to throw the crates containing *Libertas* overboard as well. But the captain said, “No! We will sink before we throw Liberty away.” So Lady Liberty was saved and now stands a symbol of freedom.

As Christians, we should have the attitude of that brave captain. Don’t throw your liberty away. Don’t go back into legalism. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth; and the truth shall set you free.” (John 8:32 NKJV) Don’t surrender the liberty you have in Christ.

Remember those ten words that are the theme of this book? Repeat them again: “It is for freedom ... that Christ has set us free.” The grace of God sets you free. It sets you free from the guilt of sin; it sets you free from the penalty of sin; and it sets you free from the religious rules and rituals that enslave people today.

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, the choice you face every day is clear: “Give me Liberty or give me legalism.” Which will you choose?

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes