

INTRODUCTION

Much of the history of President Franklin D. Roosevelt is predominated by his wartime speeches. However, many historians believe his greatest speech was made eleven months before Pearl Harbor. It wasn’t called the State of the Union address back then, but on January 6, 1941 President Roosevelt delivered a speech in which he outlined four freedoms people everywhere in the world should enjoy. These are: (1) Freedom of speech; (2) Freedom of worship; (3) Freedom from want; (4) Freedom from fear. Two years later, to help the war bond effort, Norman Rockwell painted four scenes picturing each of these basic human freedoms.

Those are precious freedoms, but the Bible reveals a fifth freedom that every person should have, and that is freedom from the penalty and tyranny of sin. The only way to enjoy spiritual freedom is through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you know Jesus, then you can sing, “Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty I’m free at last!” But this freedom doesn’t mean we can live without boundaries. I’ve entitled this message, “We are set free to serve—NOT to sin.”

Galatians 5:1: 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. That’s the theme verse for Galatians, now skip down to Galatians 5:13-15: You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

I was sixteen years old, and had just gotten my driver’s license. I was excited about taking a girl out on a “car date.” My parents had recently gotten a brand new 1969 Chevrolet Impala. It was light blue with a white vinyl top, and best of all it had an amazing device called a built in 8-track tape player. I had a new Young Rascals tape, so I was ready for the date.

I picked Becky up at her house in the country. Of course, when you grow up in a small town in LA, the country is only five minutes out of town. I could tell she was impressed with my car. After enjoying some fun at the local skating rink, I drove her home. I decided to take a detour through the woods on some dirt roads to show off how well I could drive. It was easy to fishtail on dirt roads, and I was doing great until I hit a muddy patch of road. I felt the car sliding to the left toward the ditch, and jerked the steering wheel hard to the right and overcorrected. The next thing I knew I was stopped in the muddy ditch on the right side of the dirt road. I gunned the engine to try to get out, but the tires were spinning. The more I gunned the engine, the deeper I sank into the mud. The mud was half-way up the passenger side door, so Becky couldn’t even open it. So we got out on my side, and I took my cell phone and called my dad. Not! Instead, we walked about a half a mile to the nearest house and borrowed their phone. My dad was already asleep, so he wasn’t a happy camper. He drove his pickup truck to where I was stuck, and tried to pull me out, but his pickup couldn’t get enough traction on the muddy road. He was a forester for International Paper Company, so he drove to his office and brought back a huge truck loaded with a D6 Caterpillar that they used to plow fire lines. Then he unloaded the Cat and hooked a

chain between it and the car and pulled me out of the mud. He didn’t say a lot that night, but he had a lot to say to me the next day! He wasn’t the only one upset with me. Becky’s dad was waiting on the front porch. I expected him to be holding a shotgun, but he wasn’t. However, he wasn’t happy. I tried to explain to him about getting stuck, but I don’t know he believed me. I don’t recall ever having a date with Becky again, and I never took a date on dirt roads again!

My problem was that when the car started toward the left ditch, I overcorrected and ended up in the other ditch. That’s human nature. It’s also our spiritual nature as well. Sometimes we get so afraid of sliding into one false belief that we overcorrect and end up in another false belief.

During our study of Galatians, I’ve been warning you about the danger of sliding into the muddy ditch of legalism—living by a set of rules. Well, there’s a ditch on the other side of the spiritual road called license—the belief that you can live without ANY rules. You can get stuck in either and you aren’t going to travel very far in the Christian life.

This is a simple message about legalism, license, and love. I want to encourage you to avoid the ditch of legalism on one side and stay away from the ditch of license on the other side. Instead stay on the high road of love!

I. LEGALISM: By keeping all the rules I can keep God happy

Legalism is a dangerous ditch to slide into. When you’re in it, you think that what you do or don’t do can affect God’s disposition toward you. Legalism says, “If I’m good today, God loves me a little bit more. But if I stumble and fail, then God doesn’t love me quite as much.” Legalism is the polar opposite of grace. Grace says it is because of God’s love for us that He saved us. It is not by human effort. Salvation is the work of the Holy Spirit, and it can’t be gained by human effort.

Earlier, Paul chastised them about legalism when he wrote, “Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (Galatians 3:3)

Melissa Taylor, one of our members, has started writing a children’s story about legalism called “The Needlenoses.” She gave me permission to share parts of it with you. Maybe some of you “older” children will enjoy it.

Once upon a time, in a small town in East Texas, there lived a very religious and upstanding family: the Needlenoses. Everyone knew the Needlenose family was religious and upstanding because every Sunday, they were at the big Baptist church.

Because they were so upstanding, the Needlenose family followed ALL the rules. The most important rule of all, of course, being, “Thou shalt attend a big Baptist church every single Sunday.” There were other lesser rules, of course, such as: “Men shalt wear a suit and tie to church, and women shalt never wear pants.” But it would take more trees than there are in all the rainforests to print enough books to contain all of the rules the Needlenoses were so careful to follow.

And out of the whole Needlenose family, the most religious and upstanding of them all was Mother Needlenose. Of all the character qualities spoken of in the Bible, Disapproval was Mother Needlenose’s favorite. In fact, she considered Disapproval to be her spiritual gift. Because Disapproval was so very ingrained into her character, she had absolutely no need in her personality for Joy, Peace, Patience, much less Love or Kindness, or any of those other non-essential character qualities.

The church itself often came under Mother Needlenose’s scrutiny. She disapproved of the WMU having an auction—yes, an auction!—to raise money for missions, because auctions are gambling, and Mother Needlenose did NOT approve of gambling. And she let the WMU know about it.

However, as helpful as her spiritual gift of Disapproval was within the church, she reserved the full force of her gift of Disapproval for the edification and building up of her husband and children, and eventually the spouses of her children.

Papa Needlenose learned to bless those around him often with his self-important talk. Self-importance was his spiritual gift. He spoke many words, often, both religious and otherwise. He was quite the expert on any and every topic from dairy cows to college football to trombones to lugnuts. And he filled the ears of everyone from miles around with his many knowledgeable and self-important words.

However, it was the religious language he was truly fluent in. He spoke Baptist words often, both to the religious and upstanding who wanted to hear them, and plowing over those unrighteous souls who didn’t. With great self-importance, he would utter such profound Biblical phrases as “God won’t put more on you more than you can handle.” “God helps those who help themselves.” And the all-time favorite Bible verse of righteous men everywhere, found somewhere in Proverbs, “A woman’s place is in the kitchen.”

I’m looking forward to the reading the entire story when Melissa finishes it, but you can get the idea of drifting into the ditch of legalism.

II. LICENSE: Because I’m under grace (and can’t lose my salvation) I can do anything I want

Through the years, several different actors have played agent 007, including Roger Moore, Pierce Brosnan, and Daniel Craig. But I think Sean Connery was the best. In all the movies, the character says, “Bond, James Bond.” If you’ve seen the movies you know that 007 is licensed to kill. That is, the law against of murder doesn’t apply to him.

Sadly, some Christians have slid across the road from legalism into the ditch of license. And their attitude is, “Grace. Under Grace. License to sin.” You might hear a message on holy living, but you are only “shaken, not stirred.” License to sin is a disgrace to grace.

In his wonderful book, *The Grace Awakening*, Chuck Swindoll writes: “The names have been changed, but the story is common. Lana met Phil in her freshman English class at the local

college. Phil’s natural charm and live-and-let-live spirit attracted Lana like a moth to a flame. And though she struggled with his flippant attitude toward their church’s moral teaching, she was captivated by his interpretation of Christian freedom. Phil was fond of saying, ‘Jesus set us free so we could explore life to the fullest, not so we could be held back by someone’s list of dos and don’ts.’

Persuaded by Phil, Lana spread her moral wings and flew into taboo airspace. There she joined a new flock of friends, saw new landscapes, and experienced new thrills. It all seemed so right, so freeing—at least for a while.

After five months the pleasures became oppressive demands. The scenery turned ugly and treacherous. Lana finally left Phil and cried out to the people she trusted the most, her parents and her pastor. Lana was a victim of freedom-abuse. And like any abused person, she needed the warm embrace of love, not the cold finger of condemnation. They prayed with her and helped her to understand the meaning of grace and purity.”

Paul wrote, “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.” (Galatians 5:13) We all are born with a sinful nature. Nobody has to teach a toddler to be selfish and to say, “No!” It’s in our spiritual DNA. When you come to Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to live in you, but that sinful nature doesn’t leave. A Christian lives with the constant struggle between these two natures. I’ll say more about these two natures next week as I talk about, “The Inner Uncivil War.”

I believe that when you come to Christ, God forgives every sin you’ve ever committed and every sin you’ll ever commit. So if I’m forgiven, then why should I run from sin? One word: Consequences. Forgiveness is God removing the penalty of my sin problem – eternity in hell. But as a Christian I still have to face the consequences of my sin in this life. Moses sinned against God by showing pride and disobedience. He was forgiven, and he’s in heaven, but he sinned, he suffered the consequence of never entering Canaan. King David sinned against God, and he was forgiven, and he’s in heaven how. But because of his sin, he suffered tragedy and heartache in his family.

Take a hammer and nails and drive them into a board. Then use the claw side of the hammer to remove the nails. If every nail represents a sin that we commit, God has removed the sin. That’s forgiveness. But the nail holes remain; those are the consequences. If you rob a bank, God can forgive you, but you still have to do the jail time.

Ben Roethlisberger is the quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers. He was the youngest quarterback to win a Super Bowl. In 2005 he was interviewed on ESPN and the reporter asked him why he rode his motorcycle without a helmet. He said, “Because you don’t have to. It’s not the law in Pennsylvania. If it was the law, I’d wear one. You’re just more free when you’re out there with no helmet on.”

Less than a year later, a car struck him while he was riding his motorcycle. He was thrown into the windshield of the car and suffered massive injuries. He was in surgery over seven hours while doctors repaired his facial and head injuries. From the hospital he released this statement to

the Steeler organization and fans. “In the past few days, I’ve gained a new perspective on life. By the grace of God, I’m fortunate to be alive. If I ever ride a motorcycle again, it will certainly be with a helmet.”

No, we aren’t compelled to keep the Laws of God, but it’s a good idea to keep them if you want to avoid the consequences that come from rebellion.

III. LOVE: The best evidence of God’s grace is faith expressed as love

Legalism is a muddy ditch to the left, and license is a muddy ditch to the right. If you want to progress in the Christian life, there is a better way. Stay on the high ground of the grace-way. And the dotted line down the middle of the grace-way is love.

Paul wrote, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” (Galatians 5:6)

A. I obey God because I love Him

Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” (John 14:15) The difference between legalism and holy living is all about motivation. There are basically three levels of obedience. Level one is fear. You obey God because you’re afraid of what He’ll do to you if you don’t. Level two is reward. You obey God because you want to earn more blessings from Him. Both of those two levels are legalism. Level three is love. You want to obey God simply because you love Him who first loved you.

I read the story of a woman who was married to a very demanding and dominating husband. He made a list of the things he wanted her to do to be a good wife. Her life was miserable and she tried to live up to his demands and expectations. Mercifully, the man died, she said of pure meanness. Later she remarried. This second husband loved her and cared for her and didn’t make demands of her. She found herself loving him as well. Several years after they were married she came across the list of expectations from her first husband. She laughed out loud, because as she read the list, she saw that these were things that she did for her present husband. Not because he demanded it, but because she loved him!

That’s why we obey God, because we love Him!

B. I am free to love others because I am loved

Paul said the entire law is summed up in the commandment where Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Before you can love others you have to love yourself. There’s a huge difference between loving yourself and self-love. Self-love is when you stand in front of the mirror and sing, “How Great Thou Art.” Loving yourself means accepting yourself as God accepts you. There’s an old Gaither song that often wanders back up onto the tip of my tongue. It says, “I am loved; I am loved; I can risk loving you. For the One who knows me best loves me most.”

Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” (John 13:34) Jesus laid down his life for us, and we should be willing to lay down our lives for others.

CONCLUSION

Last Christmas, Athens, Texas was in the national news because of their Nativity Scene on the property of the Henderson County Courthouse. An atheist group in Wisconsin called Freedom from Religion sued the county government to have the Nativity scene removed. Just last February a militant atheist named Patrick Greene joined the lawsuit to have the Nativity scene removed.

Greene was a taxi driver in San Antonio, who was forced to quit his job because of failing vision from cataracts. He was no longer able to support himself and his wife of 33 years. Some Christians probably thought, “Good. He got what he deserved.” But when some Christians in Athens heard that Mr. Greene had lost his job and needed money, they decided to show him the love of Christ. Jessica Crye, a member of Sand Springs Baptist Church, went to her pastor to ask if they could collect money to help Mr. Greene. Jessica said: “I knew of his lawsuit and threats and thought how sad it was for him to be so bitter toward Christians. I thought he must have never felt the love of God through Christians... This is a great opportunity to turn the other cheek and show God’s love.”

They collected several hundred dollars and sent it to Mr. Greene. Here was his reaction: “I was completely flabbergasted because Christians had always treated me like dirt because of my atheist beliefs... They [Christians in Athens] said they wanted to do what real Christians are supposed to do—love you—and they wanted to help. The money is better than prayer because Wal-Mart doesn’t accept prayer as legal tender.”

We’re not sure if Mr. Greene has fully started believing in Jesus, but for sure, the love that Christians showed him changed his heart. He dropped his lawsuit against Henderson County. The Christian Post reported: “As a symbol of his appreciation to the Christian community both in and around Athens, Greene has purchased a star for the top of the tree that is part of the Christmas display he once railed against. He also wrote a letter to the Freedom From Religion Foundation to explain why their legal arguments against the Nativity are not valid.” (Christian Post)

Mr. Greene had an answer for every argument for the truth of Christianity. He could resist every clever theological point, but there was something that he couldn’t resist—the love of God shown by the people of God.

I recall a chorus we sang when I was a teenager that went this way: “We are one in the Spirit; We are one in the Lord; We are one in the Spirit; We are one in the Lord; And we pray that our unity will one day be restored; And they’ll know we are Christians by our love; Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

Remember, grace sets us free—but we’re not free to sin. We’re free to serve!

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes