

INTRODUCTION

During this Grace-Robbers series we have noted there are many people who are still trying to live under law instead of grace. Rules and laws can often be ridiculous, and even funny. Here is a list of ten actual laws from different states.

1. In Alabama it is illegal for a driver to be blindfolded while operating a vehicle.
2. In Florida you cannot chain your alligator to a fire hydrant.
3. In Minnesota it is illegal to tease a skunk.
4. In Louisiana biting someone with your natural teeth is “simple assault,” while biting someone with your false teeth is “aggravated assault.”
5. In Tennessee dogs must have a permit signed by the mayor in order to congregate in groups of three or more on private property.
6. In Oklahoma whale hunting is strictly forbidden.

If you think other states are the only ones have crazy laws, think again—Texas has its share. For instance,

7. In Texas, if two trains going in opposite directions on the same track meet each other, one can’t move until the other does.
8. In Texas it is legal for a blind person to go hunting unless long as they have someone with them who isn’t blind.
9. An old Texas law states you can be legally married by publicly introducing a person as your husband or wife 3 times. (Be careful guys!)
10. In Houston, beer may not be purchased after midnight on a Sunday, but it may be purchased on Monday.

The good news of the gospel of grace is we no longer have to live under the rules and regulations of the Old Testament Law. In the passage before us we are going to consider the danger of living by rules rather than living in a relationship with the Living God.

The key verse in this context is Colossians 2:14. “God forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.” Now read our focal passage, Colossians 2:20-23: “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ‘Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?’ These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”

The danger of legalism is it reduces the Christian life to a set of rules and regulations, and when a legalist keeps the rules, he feels good about himself. It reminds me of the old nursery rhyme:

*Little Jack Horner
Sat in a corner*

Eating a Christmas pie

*He put in his thumb
And pulled out a plum
And said, “What a good boy am I!”*

When a legalist keeps the rules, he feels he is a good little boy. Legalism creates an atmosphere in which people can be proud of the way they act, but they can't be happy. To them, Christianity isn't something to be enjoyed; it is a religion to be endured. And anything fun must be either sinful or fattening, and must be avoided at all costs. Therefore, the more solemn and sad you are, the holier you are. I've written my own nursery rhyme:

*Legalist Holy Hugh
Sat in a pew
Dreaming of pie in the sky*

*He looked 'round the room
Mimicked all the gloom
And said, “What a good boy am I!”*

In this message we'll consider both the misery of legalism and the joy of God's grace.

I. THE MISERABLE FRUSTRATION OF LEGALISM

Legalism is the attitude I can establish or improve my standing before God by my activities. In the early days of American education, teachers were told to stress the “three Rs of education: Reading, Riting, and Rithmatic” (Obviously, spelling was not a high priority!) If you want to recognize legalism, look for the 3 “Rs” of legalism: Rules, Rituals, & Rewards. A legalist is someone who has a list of rules longer than God's list. They carefully follow the prescribed rituals and regulations, because they believe God will reward their proper behavior.

When Paul wrote to the church at Galatia, he scolded them for substituting legalism for grace. 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) You may be a legalist if you started out your Christian life by believing you were saved by grace, but then you started trying to earn brownie points from God by following rules and regulations. But legalism only leads to frustration and misery—why?

(1) Legalism gives a sense of accomplishment, but you can never do enough

At first, religious legalism can be attractive, because people want to know exactly how to act and what will be the result of their behavior. So if you are told all you have to do is take communion, or be baptized, or confess your sins to a priest, or read your Bible every day, then you like because those are things you can check off your list. Then you can feel a sense of accomplishment.

For example, some people think simply attending church will improve their standing before God. Through the years I’ve had people brag to me they haven’t missed church in ten years—but they act as mean as the devil. They keep on believing by attending church, God will bless them. Or worse, they think if they *don’t* attend church, God might punish them. So, out of a sense of religious obligation they make their way to church every Sunday—they even park their car so they can make a fast getaway as soon as they have fulfilled their weekly obligation. They may not ever sing a word, or open their Bible, but at least they are there. And “Whew!” as soon as it’s over (or actually before it’s over)—they’re gone. They may have never had a sense of having entered into the presence of the Almighty Creator, but they feel good about being in church. That’s legalism in it’s basic form.

The trouble with doing things to impress God is it forces you to keep coming up with more and better things to do *for* God. For instance, if you *really* want God to bless you, then maybe you can do *more* than the average person to earn *more* of His favor. Throughout history people have become monks, fasted, or endured masochistic pain as religious acts of devotion. Paul refers to this in verse 23 when he writes about “harsh treatment of the body.” Those kinds of acts may appear valuable, but the Bible says they are worthless.

Several years ago our family visited New Mexico on vacation. North of Santa Fe we visited a small Catholic Church called El Santuario de Chimayo. It seats less than 100 people, but tens of thousands of people flock there every year, because it is believed the dirt there has healing properties, so people collect samples of the soil. Every Good Friday, people participate in a pilgrimage to the church, walking anywhere from 10 to 100 miles through the harsh desert. Many of them crawl the last few miles. When we were there, an old man was crawling on his knees up the trail to the church. Why do people treat their bodies harshly for religious reasons? Perhaps they are trying to show God how much they love Him in hopes He will bless them more because of their self-imposed pain and discomfort—but sadly, the Bible teaches this kind of legalism is worthless. There is nothing you can do to make God love you any more than He does—and there is nothing you can do to make God love you any less. He loves you not because of who you are, but because of Who He is—God IS love!

(2) Legalism enslaves you to performance-based religion

There are only two kinds of faith systems in the world: Performance-based religion and pardon-based faith. The Gospel of God’s grace is pardon based. It is based on God granting to guilty sinners a full and unconditional pardon. Legalism devolves the Christian faith into a quasi-Old Testament system of performance-based rules.

I heard a funny story about a Methodist preacher who was sitting in his study when he looked out the window behind his desk and saw Jesus Christ standing outside watching him. He didn’t know what to do so he called his bishop. The pastor said, “You won’t believe this, sir, but Jesus Christ is standing outside my study looking at me.” The bishop gasped and asked, “What’s He doing?” The pastor stole another glance and whispered, “Nothing. He’s just watching me. What should I do?” The bishop thought for a minute and suggested, “Look busy.”

That’s funny, because it sounds like something we would do at work when the boss walks by—look busy. We want to act like we’re working hard so the boss won’t reprimand us. At work, you may be subjected to an annual performance review, but God isn’t impressed with our performance.

To some, God is like a tough boss or a cruel taskmaster watching their every move, just waiting to pounce on them at the smallest mistake and say something like, “Ah ha! I caught you now!” If describes your understanding of God, then you feel the urge to constantly “look busy.” You’ll find yourself wanting to do more and more to impress God. It robs Christianity of its joy and zest.

Lewis Johnson, a long-time professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, recognized the danger of legalism back in 1963 when he wrote: “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 dull, and listless profession. The glorious name of our Lord becomes a synonym for a gloomy-killjoy. The Christian under the law is a miserable parody of the real thing.” (*The Paralysis of Legalism*, 1963)

(3) Legalism displeases the Lord

Legalism isn’t a harmless attitude. It is something that upsets the Lord. The legalists of Jesus’ day were called Pharisees. They were scrupulous in their religious observance. Jesus was a loving person who was so tender-hearted, He cried at the funeral of Lazarus, even though He knew Lazarus would be resuscitated in a few minutes. He was so kind-hearted, He took little children in His arms and blessed them. But lest you mistake Jesus for a spiritual Mr. Rogers who was nice and sweet about everything and everyone, remember the ONE thing made Him furious was Pharisaical, legalistic religion. There’s no way to sugarcoat His violent objection to legalism. In Matthew 23 Jesus said to legalists:

“You hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces.” (vs. 13)

“You make him [a convert] twice as much a son of hell as you are.” (vs. 15)

“You blind guides! You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (vs. 24)

“You are like whitewashed tombs” (vs. 27)

“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (vs. 33)

We should likewise be upset about the things upset Jesus. Legalism is the AIDS infecting the church today. We should be doing everything we can to eradicate it. We should not only avoid legalism ourselves, but we should learn to recognize those grace-robbers who would try to infect us with their dangerous spirit of legalism.

II. THE WONDERFUL LIBERATION OF GRACE

I heard about two dairy cows grazing alongside a highway when a tanker truck full of milk passed by. On the side of the truck was a sign said, “Fresh Milk—Pasteurized, homogenized, standardized, Vitamin A added.” One cow turned to the other and said, “Kinda makes you feel inadequate, doesn’t it?”

Have you ever looked at the requirements of the Christian life and felt inadequate? Do words like “holiness, sanctification, perfection, blameless, or pure” scare you? It will be a great day for you when you admit in and of yourself you are totally INCAPABLE of living the Christian life. When you admit that, you are ready to experience the wonderful liberation of God’s grace.

In his wonderful book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning wrote: “Though lip service is paid to the gospel of grace, many Christians live as if only personal discipline and self-denial will mold the perfect me. The emphasis is on what I do rather than what God is doing. In this curious process God is the benign old spectator in the bleachers who cheers when I show up for morning quiet time? Sooner or later we are confronted with the painful truth of our inadequacy and insufficiency? We discover our inability to add even a single inch to our spiritual stature.” Paul wrote these words to the Christians at Galatia who had substituted legalism for grace, “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!...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.” (Galatians 2:21; 5:1) Legalism keeps you in slavery to rules, but God’s grace sets you free in a love relationship. Notice two liberating aspects of grace:

(1) Grace removes the pressure to perform

One of my earliest memories as a child is being called upon to perform before my relatives at my Mema’s house in Panama City, Florida. I can recall all the grown ups sitting around while I danced around the room to a song called “Roll out the Barrel” (I had no idea what was in the barrel, but it sure was a catchy tune!) As I whirled and twirled and flipped and dipped, the adults would laugh and applaud—and I must admit I enjoyed the attention and the ovation I got.

My Uncle Charles always rewarded me after I danced. He loved to play this joke on me: He would hold out a nickel in one hand and a dime in the other and ask which one I wanted. Of course, the nickel was larger than the dime, so I would choose the nickel. He would get a real chuckle out of that. Later, of course, I realized the dime was worth twice as much as the nickel, but I also figured the first time I chose the dime; I would lose my steady supply of nickels. So I kept on dancing and earning nickels.

Whether you’ve been on stage in theater, danced, played a piano recital, or performed as an athlete, you probably know the feeling of being applauded. Something in our nature seeks the applause of others. This creates what is often called “performance pressure.” It’s easy to transfer this performance pressure to the Christian life. It makes us want to “do more” and “try harder.”

But the grace of God is stubborn—our performance doesn’t affect it in the least. Because of grace, there is nothing we can perform to earn His applause. He loves you as you are—not as you should be, because none of us are as we should be. If you aren’t completely stunned by the grace of God, then you haven’t fully understood what grace is.

In 1987, all of America stopped to watch a real-life drama unfolded in Midland, Texas. Eighteen month old Jessica McClure fell down an abandoned well and was trapped. Millions of

Americans watched the story of Baby Jessica unfold. To the relief of everyone, Jessica came out of the well on October 16, 1987.

In case you don't remember the details of the story, let me give you a summary of what happened: “After 55 grueling hours trapped at the bottom of a 22-foot well, eighteen-month-old Jessica clawed her way out of the bottom of the pit, inch by inch, digging her little toes and fingers into the side of the well. What a hero, that Jessica!”

You may be thinking, “Whoa! That's not what happened! She didn't climb out! She was totally helpless down there; she was powerless to save herself. If she hadn't been rescued by those people she would have perished.” You are exactly right! And you and I were both in exactly the same situation. The Bible says, “At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” (Romans 5:6) We deserve no more applause for our salvation than baby Jessica got for being rescued. God alone deserves the credit. There is no act we can perform that deserves the applause of others.

Grace tells us God has done it all and God WILL do it all, therefore, there is no longer any pressure to “look busy” or to “work hard” in hopes God will toss us a few more favors! I'm enjoying the full riches of God's grace, and it's a liberating experience to stop dancing for nickels!

(2) Grace frees you to enjoy your relationship with God

A legalist starts feeling uncomfortable whenever you start talking about *enjoying* anything religious! But grace sets us free to enjoy a relationship rather than endure rules. The Westminster Catechism asks the question: What is the chief end of man? And the answer is simply: To glorify God and enjoy Him forever! Amen! Are you still enduring religion or are you enduring a relationship with God? Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15). In other words, grace-filled Christians do what he says because they love him, not because they want to impress him.

During a conference on comparative religions at Oxford University, experts from around the world gathered to debate what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. As they discussed, they eliminated the idea of incarnation, because other religions claimed gods had become men. They eliminated resurrection, because again, other religions had accounts of people returning from the dead. The debate continued until C.S. Lewis wandered into the room.

“What's all the rumpus about?” he asked. His colleagues explained they were trying to find a unique teaching in Christianity. Lewis said, “Oh, that's easy. It's grace. The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, with no strings attached, goes against the teaching of every other religion. The Buddhist has his eight-fold path; the Hindu earns nirvana, the Jews have the Torah; and the Muslim has his code of law—each of these are based on earning the approval of their deity. Only in the Christian faith dares to make God's love unconditional and undeserved.”

I am fascinated the song “Amazing Grace.” It is one of those songs that transcends different music genres and cultures. In addition to being our song, it is the official national anthem of the Cherokee Nation and has been recorded by more than 40 singers around the world.

A few years ago, we took some college students from our church part of the Apache Belles drill team from Tyler Junior College to perform American music in our partner city in China. One evening we set up in a large park and almost 10,000 people gathered for the concert. The favorite song of the Chinese audience was “My heart will go on” by Celine Dion from the movie “Titanic.” The group also sang “Amazing Grace” and memorized the first verse in Mandarin. When they sang that song, the crowds grew quiet as they recognized the power and the beauty of the tune and message. As our group sang, I was amazed to see dozens, maybe hundreds of the Chinese people mouthing the words to Amazing Grace as our group sang them. It brought tears to my eyes and I realized again God’s amazing grace is indeed for every people, culture, language and people!

CONCLUSION

In the early church, the first Christians were all Jews. When God started choosing Gentiles to be His children, they were faced with a dilemma: Did these new Gentile Christians have to become Jews first in order to be Christians? Some of early preachers were teaching unless the Gentile men were circumcised they couldn’t be saved. (Acts 15:1) But in an impassioned speech, Simon Peter said, “Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we are saved, just as they are.” (Acts 15:10-11) The choice was simple—the grace of God or the yoke of legalism. Peter claimed the Old Testament law with all its rules and regulations was like a heavy yoke on a person’s neck. A yoke was a harness used to control farm animals.

For much of my Christian life, I lived under the heavy yoke of legalism. I thought a good Christian refrained from doing certain things. For instance, I never read the Sunday comics in the newspaper until after church—for some weird reason I thought it would desecrate the holy day by laughing at Dagwood and Blondie before church! I thought the only proper church attire was a coat and tie—and nothing too bright or flashy! I believed the King James Version was the only correct version of the Bible. I thought it was sinful to listen to secular music. My daily quiet time was just a part of my routine I fulfilled with military precision. I thought I could make God love me more if I kept certain rules and regulations. I was bearing a heavy yoke around my neck. In Acts 15 Peter said it is a yoke too heavy for anyone to bear—I agree. Are you still trying to obey rules and observe rituals to earn God’s favor? All I can say is: The yoke’s on you!

I don’t know about you, but I don’t want yoke. I have decided to renounce legalism in all of its dangerous forms. I choose to live in another yoke—a yoke that isn’t heavy at all. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Instead of the yoke of legalism I have decided to be in the yoke of Jesus. It’s a yoke designed for two—Jesus is providing all the grace and power. That’s why His yoke is easy and His burden is

light. He’s carrying the entire load! I’ve still got a long way to go, but I am beginning to discover God’s grace in all its beauty and power.

A legalist often says, “The Christian life is HARD!” I disagree. The Bible says, “The way of the transgressor is hard!” (Proverbs 13:15) But God asks, “Is anything too HARD for me?” (Jeremiah 32:27) The Christian life is not YOU trying to imitate Jesus—would be more than hard—would be impossible. The Christian life is allowing Jesus, who is full of grace and truth to live His life through you.

So, child of God, run as fast as your legs will take you from grace-robbers, and reach out your arms to the open arms of Jesus and embrace grace, and then—in the name of Jesus, lighten up and take it easy! Because Jesus said His yoke is *easy* and His burden is *light*!

OUTLINE

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The 3 "Rs" of legalism: Rules, Rituals & Rewards)

"Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" *Galatians 3:3*

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- (2) Legalism enslaves you to performance-based religion
- (3) Legalism displeases the Lord

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes