

# **Beware of Grace-Robbers!**

**Colossians 2:13-17; 20-22**

Pastor David O. Dykes, Green Acres Church, Tyler, Texas, August 8, 2021

**INTRODUCTION:** When I was younger I had brief dreams of being a Biblical Archaeologist. When I was a freshman in college, I spent three weeks in Israel digging at the excavations at Beth Shan. After a few days of using a spoon and a toothbrush in a tiny six-foot square under the hot sun, I decided against being an archaeologist.

But I know enough about archaeology from that experience, (and from watching the Indiana Jones movies) to know grave robbers are the bane of archaeologists. All across the globe, when archaeologists unearth a historical crypt or grave, they are often disappointed to learn grave robbers have long since looted many of the valuable artifacts.

In my opinion, there is a tragedy occurring that is far worse than anything grave-robbers can do. It is the tragedy of grace-robbers: And grace is more valuable than gold or silver. Two thousand years ago, the Apostle Paul was in prison when he heard some false teachers were going around to the churches and teaching a doctrine that said Christians had to obey the Old Testament laws of God in order to be accepted.

They were grace-robbers, and we have a new generation of them with us today. They fill the pews of every church. They would never call themselves legalists or grace-robbers, they just haven't discovered the liberating power of grace.

Paul addressed this problem in **Colossians 2:13-17: And when you were dead in trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made you alive with him and forgave us all our trespasses. He erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and has taken it away by nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and disgraced them publicly; he triumphed over them in him.**

**Therefore, don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is Christ.**

**Colossians 2:20-22: If you died with Christ to the elements of this world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations: “Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch”? All these regulations refer to what is destined to perish by being used up; they are human commands and doctrines.**

When I was growing up in L.A. (Lower Alabama) we had a dog that was part German Shepherd. Judy, my older sister, said that it was the oldest child’s privilege to name all the pets, so she named him Rex. Rex was a ferocious looking dog, but he was a big chicken at heart. He was scared of everything. None of our pets ever came inside; they were “yard pets.” But once when it thundered, Rex was so frightened he broke through the screen door and came in and hid under the table!

His bark wasn’t worse than his bite, because he seldom barked...and he never bit. However, there was one thing that could make Rex bark. I can recall once watching as a buzzard flew around in a circle above our yard. Old Rex started barking and chasing the buzzard’s shadow on the ground. Poor, dumb, bird-brained Rex—he never figured out the shadow wasn’t real.

Sadly, there are many well-meaning Christians who are doing the same thing. They are chasing shadows: They are still trying to please God by keeping religious rules and observing religious rituals. **Legalism is the attitude that you can earn or lose God’s favor by what you do or don’t do.** In this message I want to answer two important questions, “What are the lies of legalism?” And “What did God nail to the cross?”

**1. WHAT ARE THE LIES OF LEGALISM?** Jesus was often attacked by the Jewish legalists who were the scribes and Pharisees. To them, religion was all about outward appearance instead of inner holiness. Let’s look at three lies and legalism and then learn the grace-full truth.

**(1) Legalistic Lie: For salvation, God does His part and I do my part!** It is a legitimate question to ask, “What must I DO to be saved?” That was the jail keeper’s exact question in Acts 16. But Paul’s answer should clue us in that we don’t really have to DO anything. He said,

**“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!”** (Acts 16:31)

Believing is not doing anything, it is simply trusting.

**Grace-full Truth: God has already done everything necessary for my salvation!** There are basically two ways to spell salvation: One is “D-O.” Some people believe Jesus Christ died on the cross for their sins, but they still think there is something for them to DO to be saved. The other way to spell salvation is: D-O-N-E. The Bible teaches that there are two kinds of righteousness—the righteousness that we try to establish ourselves—and the Bible says that **“all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”** (Isaiah 64:6) The other kind of righteousness is the righteousness God gives us as a gift—the righteousness of Jesus.

You say, “Now, wait a minute, pastor, are you saying I’m like a robot and God just saves me and I have no part in the transaction? Don’t I choose Him?” Sure, but He chose you before you chose Him. “Don’t I have to accept Jesus?” Sure, but before you ever accepted Him, He accepted you.

Do you want to know what our part in salvation is? Watch this beanbag. I’m going to drop it. Gravity is going to do its part and the beanbag is going to do its part. What did the book do? Nothing. It just dropped, because of the power of gravity. It didn’t have to DO anything. Just as gravity drew the book downward, Jesus said, **“No man can come to me unless the Father who has sent me draws him.”** (John 6:44)

In John 3, a man named Nicodemus came to Jesus to ask how to have eternal life. Jesus said, “You must be born again.” Jesus compared spiritual birth with physical birth. Okay, so would someone like to stand up right now and tell us what you did to be born? How many of you had a “part” in it? I was there, but you’ll never hear me say, “Yep, January 16, 1953, you should have seen me! My mom did her part and I did my part!” Nope. I was born, but I didn’t really have to DO anything except be there! Salvation is the same way. I was there on March 11, 1961 when I was born again, but I really didn’t DO anything!

The great radio preacher, J. Vernon McGee, writes about a country boy down South years ago who wanted to join the church. In this church, the deacons examined everyone before they could join. They asked him, “How did you get saved?” His answer was, “God did his part, and I did

my part.” They were at little concerned with this answer, so they asked him, “What was God’s part and what was your part?” His answer is classic. He said, **“God’s part was the saving, and my part was the sinning. I done run from him as fast as my sinful heart and rebellious legs could take me. But God done took out after me till He run me down and saved me.”** That’s the way all of us are saved. If it is by works, then it is not of grace—but if it is of grace, then none of it is by works!

**(2) Legalistic Lie: Everyone’s spiritual experience must be identical.**

Legalists believe every follower of Jesus Christ should look and act a certain way. Remember the Matrix movies? Neo was fighting against a computer-generated villain named Agent Smith. He wore a black suit and sunglasses. But there wasn’t just one agent Smith, there were hundreds of identical Agent Smiths. That reminds me of some churches and Christians: They would love for every Christian to dress a certain way, talk a certain way, and even smell a certain way!

Their attitude can be summarized in this poem I call “The Legalists’ Creed: **Believe as I believe, no more no less. That I alone am right, and no one else confess. Feel only as I feel, think only as I think. Eat only what I eat, and drink only what I drink. Look only as I look, do always as I do; Then and only then, will I fellowship with you!**

Don’t believe this legalistic lie. Instead, I’ve got good news for you.

**Grace-full Truth: God delights in infinite variety and surprise!**

God could have created us so we look exactly alike, but He made us so different that the skin pattern on your thumb is different from the other 7 billion people on the planet. No two snowflakes are identical. No two sunsets are the same. If you want to see how much God loves variety...just glance around you right now and look at all the different noses He created—and you’ll also see God has a sense of humor! The Bible says this about God, **“All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people. The variety is wonderful!”** (1 Corinthians 12:6 *The Message*)

I love the story I heard once about a Baptist preacher who believed Baptists were the only ones who had the truth. He was a guest preacher in a Baptist church once and started his message by saying, “Everyone

here who is a Baptist, and proud to be a Baptist, say, ‘Amen!’” There was a thunderous response as everyone said, “AMEN!” Then the preacher said, “Is there anyone here who isn’t a Baptist? Say, ‘Amen.’” From the back of the church came the voice of a boy who offered a timid, “Amen.” The preacher said, “Son, what are you?” The boy said, “Sir, I’m a Methodist.” The preacher thought he would embarrass the boy, so he said, “Son, would you tell everyone here WHY you are a Methodist?” The boys said, “I’m a Methodist because my mother and father were Methodists.” The preacher smiled, because he knew he could trap the boy in his own words. He said, “Well, son, let me ask you this. If your mother and father had been idiots, what would that make you?” The boy said, “In that case, I guess I’d be a Baptist!” May I tell you a secret? Come close and let me whisper, because it’s a secret some folks don’t know, “Baptists aren’t the only ones going to Heaven. There are lots of other churches out there sharing the truth...and they aren’t all Baptist.” There is an amazing diversity and beauty in the Body of Christ!

**(3) Legalistic Lie: If I obey God, I’ll earn more of His love!** Some Christians embrace the idea of grace for salvation, but then they fall into the trap of thinking that *after* they become a Christian there are things left to DO to keep salvation in effect.

I must confess I’ve never had a problem believing it was God’s grace—and God’s grace alone—that brought me into His Family. As I’ve said before, I’m a recovering legalist. For years I believed (and preached) that once you are saved there were things you *must* do if you wanted to continue to receive God’s favor. I thought I *had* to read my Bible and pray daily if I wanted to maintain the flow of God’s love and blessing in my life. I thought I *had* to constantly be witnessing and bringing people to Christ—and if I wasn’t, I was disappointing God.

In fact, some of you as old as me can remember how we used to have a checklist on our weekly Sunday School offering envelope. We could even check off how good we had been. We checked that we were present, on time, brought our Bibles, had studied our lessons, and that we were staying for church. We could also report how many people we had contacted for the church the previous week. I can remember how

good it made me feel to check all those blanks, and I was certain God loved me a little more, because I had been a good little boy. That's how most of us got into this "performance based" legalism.

**Grace-full Truth: I want to obey God because I am loved!** Now, if you think grace means there are no rules, you've missed the point by a country mile. And if you think grace means you can sin all you want, you've turned God's grace into what Bonhoeffer called, "Cheap grace." The difference between legalism and grace is in the MOTIVE behind your obedience. If you obey God with the belief it will improve your standing with God, or that He will love you less if you don't, then you're sliding into the gloom of frozen legalism. But if you obey God because you love Him and know you are deeply loved, then you are basking in the warmth of light of His grace. Jesus said, **"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him."** (John 14:21)

I don't read my Bible and pray because I feel like I have to: I do it because I want to! I don't try to share my faith with people because I feel like I have to: I do it because I know how much God loves me and I want others to know that love.

So don't give in to these lies of legalism. They are grace-robbers.

Now let's answer the second question from this passage.

**2. WHAT DID GOD NAIL TO THE CROSS?** Have you ever noticed that before? On the day of the crucifixion, Almighty God was nailing something to the cross. Look at Colossians 2:14 again and notice the subject of the sentence. **"He (God) erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and (God) has taken it away by nailing it to the cross."**

The Roman soldier wasn't the only one with a hammer in his hand that day. At the same time, God was nailing two important things to the cross of Jesus.

**(1) All my sin and shame.** The reason we couldn't relate to a holy God on our own is because our lives were full of wrong thoughts and wicked deeds. The Romans crucified thousands of criminals, and it was customary to place a sign above the head of the person crucified. The

sign listed their name and their crime. For instance, a typical sign might say, “Simon Bar Rueven: Murder.”

When Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified, he put a sign above him that said, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” The only crime Pilate accused Jesus of committed was that of being a king. But there was an unseen sign on the cross—written by the finger of God—and on it was listed all of my sin and all of your sin. And according to Isaiah 53:6, it was God who placed our sin on Jesus. The Bible says, **“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”** That word literally means to be crushed—God placed the crushing weight of my sin and your sin on Jesus. Have you ever considered the shame of the cross? The purpose of crucifixion was to execute a criminal in the most shameful, inhumane way possible.

On one of my trips to visit our partner city in China, I was walking downtown one afternoon. In front of one of the largest stores there were three men sitting on low stools, each with a sign on the sidewalk before them. A policeman was standing behind them. I asked my Chinese friend who those men were. He explained they were petty criminals, and as part of their punishment they had to sit in a public place with a sign listing their crime. One of the signs said, “Drunk driver.” The other said, “Thief.” Another said, “Drug user.” The streets were crowded and people walked by identifying those men by their crimes. You may think public shame is a too strong a form of punishment, but our crime rate in American is 10 times higher than in China. Shame can be a powerful force.

In Hebrews 12 the Bible says that when Jesus went to the cross, He endured the cross and embraced our shame. Even though Jesus found the sin and the shame of the cross revolting, He endured it anyway. He scorned it, but He embraced it. In His grace, He embraced my disgrace! If you are a Christian, you can rejoice, because you don’t have to carry the weight of your sin and shame any more: It was nailed to the cross!

**(2) The Old Testament ceremonial regulations.** The Bible says when Jesus died, God “cancelled the handwritten code” that was against us. That refers to many of the Old Testament ceremonial laws. Many

Christians are confused about what parts of the Old Testament we should obey today. For instance, they ask, “Is all the Bible true?” And the answer is: Yes. Then they read a verse in Leviticus that says you can’t eat pork, or catfish, or men shouldn’t cut the hair at the sides of their head. And they ask, “Why don’t we obey that?” Here’s your answer: Because at the Cross, God cancelled all the Old Testament ceremonial regulations. He took them away nailing it to the cross. In the Old Testament there are hundreds of rules and regulations God set down for the Jews dealing with diet, festivals, hygiene, and the sacrificial system at the Temple. There is even a verse in Deuteronomy 21 that says the way to deal with a stubborn, rebellious teenage son is to take him outside the city gates and stone him to death! Some parents might be interested in restoring that regulation! Of course, the most common question is, “Why don’t we observe the Sabbath Day?” Paul wrote specifically, that we shouldn’t let anyone judge us about a Sabbath Day or religious festivals – those are the shadows – but the substance is Jesus.

The moment Jesus died, He not only erased all our sin, but He also erased the old ceremonial and civil law of the Jews. He fulfilled the all the law. He was the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. As He breathed His last breath, He shouted, “*Tetelestai!*” which means, “It is finished!” That was a word that was written on a debt that meant, “Paid in full.”

About 1/4 mile from the Cross stood the Jewish Temple. Inside the Holy of Holies it was believed the presence of Jehovah dwelt—His Shekinah Glory. A thick curtain separated the presence of God from the world. No person could enter the Holy of Holies except for the High Priest—and he could only enter for a few hours on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The moment Jesus died; the Bible says the curtain was torn in two from *top to bottom!* God was saying, “You don’t need the sacrificial system anymore. You don’t need the ceremonial regulations anymore!”

The priests had to be shocked, but after their initial shock, they repaired the curtain and continued to perform the same old sacrifices at the temple until it was destroyed in 70A.D. I know some Christians who



erect their own curtains and try to live lives of legal observance instead of basking in the grace and forgiveness that is ours in Christ. Those regulations were nailed to the Cross! You are set free from the law!

**CONCLUSION:** A few years ago, I stood in the National Gallery in London, intrigued by a painting by Gerard David entitled, “**Christ nailed to the Cross.**” (1480) There is a replica over in our CrossWalk Life of Christ Gallery. That day in London, I stood there for over thirty minutes fascinated by the details. I noticed the robe, the groomed puppy sniffing a skull. I noticed the expression of the men who were crucifying Jesus, and the two little boys watching from the background. But the one detail that most caught my attention was the face of Jesus. *He was looking at me.* I moved ten feet to my left, and Jesus was still staring at me. It was as if the painter wanted us to understand Jesus is looking into our eyes saying, “I love you so much that I am enduring this cross for you.”

And right now, Jesus is looking into your heart with a gaze of unconditional love saying, “I love you so much I gave my life for you.” For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith. And that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any person could boast.” That’s something that’s better than legalism – it’s the amazing grace of God.