



The following is a large excerpt from Chapter 5

The Grace Factor

I Kissed Legalism Goodbye

Pondering the magnitude of God's grace for us at salvation is *meant* to be overwhelming. But how does this *truth-bomb* of grace translate into our relationship to God today? How do we respond? What do we *do*? Unfortunately, some react to God's rich outpouring of undeserved grace and mercy and are overcome with a desire to somehow try and "pay God back" for all He has done for them. But though it appears the noble thing to do, it is nevertheless misguided and unbiblical. And here's why. As we attempt the impossible task of paying God back for His great gift of grace, we discover all the more how we fall short of His perfect standard. In other words, we fail. In our own strength, we simply cannot consistently live the kind of life we desire. And this leaves us very frustrated, and feeling very guilty. It becomes so hard to maintain that we wonder if it's even worth it. So we do what comes naturally. We try harder. We "recommit ourselves". We rededicate our lives to Him over and over again. We vow to live by his ways, promising to "do better *this time*". But "this time" comes and we fail, slipping right back into failure and the guilt trap. The futility grows as we spin our wheels, getting nowhere. Unfortunately today, many churches are filled with moral, well-meaning, sincere people who are trying their best to do right. They are passionate about earning God's favor and approval through their obedience. But their best is never good enough. So what now?

Fortunately, the apostle Paul addressed this very issue in his letter to the Galatians. In revealing the relationship between law and grace, he teaches us how to properly respond to God's gift of goodness and mercy. Through his Spirit-inspired counsel, we uncover Four Myths about "keeping the rules".

Myth #1

Obeying God's Rules Can Save Me

(Galatians 1:6-9; 3:24; 5:1-4)

If Satan would lie to us about anything, it would be concerning how we obtain salvation and maintain a holy standing before God. That was precisely the fairy tales he pitched to the Galatians, and they bought it. They took the “works-salvation” bait – hook, line and sinker. But Paul declared those who promoted this teaching to be “false brethren” (2:4). These men were deceivers who had crept into the church, convincing young believers that a person was declared righteous (or justified) through faith in Christ *plus* some external deed or act. Paul was shocked that the Galatian Christians had allowed these teachers into their fellowship, so he wrote them in order to combat this heresy.

Specifically, these false teachers taught that keeping part of the Old Testament Law was necessary for salvation *and* to remain righteous before God. This upset Paul so much that he called the Galatians “foolish” (meaning spiritually dull or having a low spiritual “IQ”).¹

“Hey”, Paul says, “You guys know better than this? What’s the matter with you?! Don't you remember what I taught you?”

He also told them they had become “bewitched” (charmed or deceptively fascinated) by this slick teaching concerning works-righteousness. But even so, it’s worth asking the question,

“What precisely is the problem with believing that faith in Christ plus good works (or obedience to God’s rules) is what saves a person?” Paul answers this question with 5 convincing biblical reasons:

1. God’s Law (His Righteous Rules) were never intended to save (Galatians 3:23-25).

Look at Paul's reasoning here:

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

Paul is saying that the Law merely served as our "tutor", leading us to Christ. The purpose of God's moral law (10 Commandments) was to demonstrate our inability to keep it. But why would He do that? So that in our futility and hopelessness, we would realize our need for a Savior. He wanted us to see our see how desperate we need for Him to accomplish salvation for us (Romans 8:3-4). Obeying God's Law cannot save us! Neither can obeying His rules keep us saved.

Never could. Never will.

2. If keeping the Law saves you, then who needs Christ? (Galatians 5:1)

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Any fool can make a rule." If you could get to Heaven on your own by keeping the rules, then you wouldn't need a Savior. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Christ set us free from having to keep the Law. So now, we don't have to become enslaved to it again. Besides, your chances of earning your way to Heaven are the same as a corpse has of running a marathon!

3. If you trust in your own good deeds, Christ will be of no benefit to you (Galatians 5:2)

Paul's stern words remind us that salvation is found in Christ alone plus nothing. "Pick one", he says. "Choose works or Christ. One or the other, but not both. But keep in mind that when you do, the other will be worthless to you as far as salvation is concerned."

4. If you keep any of God's rules, you have to keep them all! (Galatians 5:3)

Theoretically, you would have to keep every one of the 10 Commandments perfectly, in letter and in spirit, for a lifetime to achieve perfection before God. And even then, you would still fall short because you were born in sin. To break one of God's commandments is to break them all (James 2:10). Only one link has to be broken for the whole chain to break. This means

you are not allowed one unclean thought, unkind word or unloving deed. Not one sin. So why even try to keep the rules? That's Paul's point exactly. Stop trying to keep the law and start trusting God with your life.

5. If you try to combine law and grace, you will forfeit (lose) grace (Galatians 5:4)

Place one drop of deadly cyanide into a glass of tea and the tea becomes poison. Paul's argument here is that the only way to "fall from grace" is by refusing to trust in it. and adding works to your salvation equation is a refusal to trust explicitly in God's grace. Grace is the only road to salvation. Keeping the law is a dead end.

Now you might be thinking, "Isn't all this a bit elementary? I mean, doesn't everybody know this stuff already?" Nope. Though it's a basic teaching of our faith, churchgoers all over the world think their good deeds somehow make a small contribution towards their salvation. The final blow to this myth is seen by answering the following two questions:

- What are you really trusting to get you to heaven?
- What is your hope of attaining righteousness before God?

God's answer to you is that it must be solely, completely and exclusively in Jesus Christ, plus nothing. Grace is free, and "earned grace" isn't grace at all. That's another oxymoron. You earn *wages*, not grace. And what you've earned in spiritual death and separation from God.² So you never want God to give you what you've "earned" as it relates to salvation. Grace is a gift for the guilty not a reward for the righteous. And you can't earn a gift.

Here's a second popular and prevalent fabrication many people believe.

Myth #2

After Salvation, Obeying God's Rules Improves My Standing Before God

(Galatians 3:24-26)

This second *un*spiritual law, which Paul refers to as “things taught by demons” (I Timothy 4:1), applies more to believers than non-believers. This subtle belief states, "If I don't do all the bad things, and if I keep myself clean from all the evil out there in the world, then God will accept me and be pleased with me." It's Checklist Christianity that says,

If I don't:

- do drugs
 - drink
 - smoke
 - curse or swear
 - have my body pierced or tattooed
 - associate with bad people
 - go to R-rated movies
 - cheat on my spouse
 - rebel against authority
 - cheat on my taxes
- . . . *then* I will be spiritual.

But are those really the things that make a person godly? The problem with a list like this is that a person can avoid all these things, be a good person and still miss salvation altogether. You can keep a list of “don'ts” and still remain unchanged by Christ's power. Rule-keeping cannot protect us

from self-centeredness and self-righteousness. It is self-deception to equate self-denial with spirituality. Look at what Paul wrote to the Colossians on this subject:

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?

These are matters which have, to be sure, the *appearance of wisdom* in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of *no value* against fleshly indulgence.

Therefore, if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. (Colossians 2:20-3:2)

We should never equate our position and standing before God with external measurements. If spirituality is nothing more than simply obeying a list of “thou shalt nots”, then any self-disciplined pagan can be spiritual. But godliness is much deeper than just having outward righteousness. Just ask the Pharisees. Keep in mind that who you are in Christ was once for all determined by what Jesus did for you at the cross - nothing more, nothing less, and nothing *else!* It was His righteousness, not yours, that purchased your salvation and won your freedom. He did for you what you couldn't have done for yourself in a million lifetimes. Now *that's* grace!

As a result of Christ's accomplishment at the cross, God views of you as being holy, and that will never change (2 Corinthians 5:21). He now sees you clothed with the very righteousness of Jesus Himself. Your standing before Him is forever fixed, based on Jesus's finished work, not yours. Self-denial cannot improve your righteous position in Christ. How foolish to think we could ever improve on the salvation God Himself has already provided for us.

But here is where things get a little “sticky”. What you can't accomplish through the “thou shalt nots” can also never be accomplished through the “thou shalt”. In other words, if you do all the *good* things a Christian is “supposed” to do, you will still not improve your position before God. For example:

- Giving •Prayer •Scripture Memory •Evangelism
- Church Attendance •Teaching a Class •Studying the Bible

These are great things, but unfortunately, none of them can make you “more holy” or acceptable in God’s sight. In fact, none of these deeds and disciplines means anything to God unless they are motivated by grace and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Blind obedience and Christian “busyness” is no substitute for a relationship with God.

The point is, as a Christian, no matter what you do, you will never be any more loved or accepted by God than you were at the moment you trusted Christ for salvation. Are there commandments in Scripture? Of course. Lots of them. Does God have standards of thought and conduct that He desires us to obey? Obviously. Absolutely. Yes! But God’s commandments must be obeyed out of a loving relationship and heart for Him, not out of a cold compulsion to "keep the rules" or to make ourselves more accepted by Him.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for the legalist. For him, the rules are just another opportunity to feel good about himself, earn God’s approval, boost his self-righteous image and exalt his pride. Have you ever fallen into this trap? Have you ever embraced this myth as truth? Lets now move on to a third faulty fairy tale.

Myth #3

Living by the Rules is the Best Way for Me to Mature in Christ

As humans, we’ve become experts at categorizing and classifying sins. Some sins are seen as vile while others almost have a *virtuous* tint to them. We are quick to rail against immorality and homosexuality but tend to wink at sins like gossip and selfie-obsession a pass. But part of maturity is

developing a clarity and sensitivity to sin, especially as it relates to our own lives. It also means not flirting with sin.

I once saw a video of a guy who put his head inside a crocodile's mouth. It did *not* turn out well for him. The same goes for anyone dumb enough to stick their hand into a den of rattlesnakes.

But while those things may terrify most Christians, we still occasionally play around with another animal equally as deadly. That ferocious beast I'm referring to is *legalism*. Seemingly harmless on the surface, it waits until we unknowingly buy into it before it stealthfully and slowly injects its poisonous venom into our bloodstream. Soon we begin losing our ability to think biblically, believing things that just aren't true. We start pursuing standards we believe will make us more acceptable to God instead of resting and relying on His accomplished work on our behalf. Traveling to our central nervous system, we soon lose feeling and grow numb to God's grace.

In its full-blown stage, it looks like Phariseeism, self-righteousness, or some cultish, hate-filled church group. But legalism typically stops short of those extremes, preferring instead to keep you supplied with small doses throughout your week. Like an addictive drug, the idea is to get you hooked on the buzz of self-righteousness, and then to feed the habit as needed. Like the jaws of that powerful crocodile, legalism bites and locks down on your mind and spirit, ultimately twisting it into compliance. And your only hope is a stronger force that is capable of freeing you before it's too late.

Fortunately, the good news is that there is an antivenom to this legalism poison. And as with a snake, this antidote is also extracted and developed from the original poison. Through looking at what legalism eventually does to us, we can see more clearly how to purify ourselves from it. Freedom from the poison of legalism comes through allowing God to radically change our belief system concerning "the rules." And to effectively do this, we need to see the effects this deadly animal has on us as Christians. Here is what legalism eventually does to us.

10 Deadly Effects of Being a Legalistic “Rule-Keeper”

1. It breeds pride and contempt for other people (Luke 18:10-14) Legalism deceives you into thinking you're something that you're not, creating a false sense of spirituality. It's like a spiritual narcotic, giving you a phony feeling of moral superiority and self-righteousness. As a believer, you are never intrinsically better than others, just “better off” because of grace.
2. It distorts the true Gospel of Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9) Salvation is by grace alone. Period. Not by works or keeping the commands and demands of the Law. Paul could not have been any more clear concerning this.
3. It causes people to major on the minors. It takes peripheral, grey issues (issues the Bible does not specifically address – such as movies, music, fashion, kissing, dating, birth control, etc) and assigns an absolute moral value to them. Doing this makes them more significant than they actually are. Legalism says things the Bible never says, creating making issues of personal Christian freedom to be gigantic deals. Sometimes legalists misapply the teachings of Scripture, forcing specific verses to apply to these grey areas. Jesus said this about those who do such things – “Their worship is a farce, for the teach man-made ideas as coming from God.”³
4. It creates a judgmental spirit. This is the worst form of Phariseeism. (Matthew 23:13-15)
5. It short-circuits spiritual growth. It creates an improper, unbalanced fear of God, preventing you from experiencing a biblical and loving relationship with Him.
6. It catapults you back into bondage to sin again. You discover you are still living under the Law, just like before. Nothing has changed. Systemic legalism may even indicate an absence of saving faith (Galatians 5:1-2).

7. It creates frustration because rules can never restrain or tame your sin nature (Col 2:23; Romans 7:18ff). Being crucified with Christ and resting in God's grace is the only remedy for dealing with the sin nature (Galatians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 12:9).⁴
8. It robs you from experiencing genuine Christian liberty. Legalism is the arch-enemy of grace and wisdom. Legalists turn general principles into specific commands. But if all you need to do is keep the rules, there is no need for wisdom, the Holy Spirit, or a relationship with God. Legalists fear biblical liberty. They believe freed Christians will abuse their freedom, and so out of this fear they use man-made rules (or God's rules misapplied) to keep them chained to the law.
9. It removes peace from your life. You can never be sure if you're ever really pleasing God. You can never be "good enough". There will always be some minor rule or command you have missed or disobeyed.
10. It prevents you from enjoying the abundant life Jesus promised (John 10:10) With legalism, you're way too busy stressing over whether you have been good enough today to really enjoy the life God intended you to have.

We can trust the words of Jesus and Paul, who teach us:

- Legalism cannot produce holiness. (Mark 7:15, 21-22)
- Legalism cannot restrain fleshly desires. (Colossians 2:19-23)
- Legalism cannot set you free from sin. (Galatians 5:1; Acts 15:10)

So legalism is anything we do or don't do in order to earn favor from God. It is primarily concerned with rewards to be gained or penalties to be avoided. It insists on conformity to man-made religious standards or God's rules improperly applied. It's "paint-by-number" Christianity, the spoken and unspoken "do's" and "don'ts" of a particular Christian circle. The problem is made

worse when this legalistic belief is forced on others through teaching or social pressure (Jesus addressed this in Mark 7:6-8). But God calls us to live in freedom from this kind of religious, unbiblical thinking. He even exhorts us to stand firm in our Christian freedom (Galatians 5:1). We are to fight against legalism like an enemy that threatens to destroy us. And why? Because God knew that wherever there is grace, there would be legalists who would try and rob us of our joy and freedom in Christ. Sadly, they are far more concerned about someone abusing his freedom in Christ than they are that he get caught up in sinful legalism. Legalists are afraid someone might give into the flesh through freedom. But ironically, that is exactly what legalism produces. Through pursuing a legalistic, self-righteous lifestyle, the sinful and proud flesh is fed and pampered. Legalism is as much a deed of the flesh as immorality or anger. Through legalism, the sinful nature's power only grows.

But like losing 20 pounds, you don't shed the weight of legalism overnight. Patterns of belief and thinking develop over years, so we must be purposeful and diligent in cleansing our hearts and minds from them. And that means consistently immersing your mind in Scripture, allowing it to wash over you and your thoughts about God, life, and yourself.

Legalism causes us to consistently fall into the performance and failure trap. Living under the rules means your conscience and behavior is controlled by your "active righteousness" (whatever you can manage to do that day for God). However, living under God's grace means your conscience and behavior is controlled by your "passive righteousness" (what Christ has already done for you). Legalism is motivated from outward pressure to conform, from external rules and expectations. Grace is motivated from within, from a relationship of love and righteous desires from the heart. Legalism requires that which the Scriptures do not require and forbids that which the Scriptures do not forbid. Rules without reasons lead to ritual and legalism. And rules without relationship lead to ruin.

Remember, we are called to a *Person*, not to a Persuasion. Christianity is not a subject to be learned but a life to be lived. It's not about our righteousness. It's about His. It's not about trying to get God to love and accept us. It's about responding to the love and acceptance we already have in Him! So watch out for those "snake-handlers" out there who traffic this poison. You must decide to enjoy the freedom and grace God has bestowed on you. "Controllers" will try and manipulate you and your behavior. Love them, but don't listen to them. The truth of the Word of God is your lamp. Let it, along with the Holy Spirit, light your way. Do this, and you won't have to worry about what is sin and what isn't.

Most Christians typically experience some form of legalism on their way to maturity. This is due to a normal "learning curve" in our spiritual development and to our natural tendency as sinners. But it's simply a matter of immaturity and spiritual infancy. We have to keep growing beyond that. Children often need to know the boundaries and what the rules are because they haven't developed the ability to think and process thought for themselves. A child doesn't know when he should cross the street, so his parents are there to remind him. And those good "rules" are necessary even though he may not yet understand "why". But as he gets older, he will be able to cross the street on his own. He realizes his parents' rule about crossing the street was given to protect him. As he grows, he figures out not only *why* he shouldn't step out in front of traffic, but also can decide on his own *when* it is safe to cross. As he grows even more, his parents will just give him general counsel as he leaves the house, "Be careful, son". Every Christian must grow beyond being a "child" in the faith to understanding the reasons behind God's commands. And as we do this, we discover the proper motivation for obeying Him. That's what grace does for us.

Myth #4

Under Grace, I Can Now Sin All I Want

Galatians 5:13

Lest we commit another equally dangerous error, let's not swing the pendulum the other way and conclude that Scripture endorses unbridled freedom. This highlights our need to be alerted to yet another deadly doctrine. This lie says, "It doesn't really matter what I do now because I am saved. I can live any way I want to now that I'm a Christian! Since my standing before God is secure and unchanging, I can just go and sin all I want!"

Wrong answer. Seriously, this is the worst form of grace abuse. God has given us liberty, but not license. We were freed from sin, not freed to sin. Look at what some of the New Testament writers had to say concerning this issue:

Peter

"Don't use your freedom as a covering for evil". (I Peter 2:16) Or, "don't hide your sin behind your salvation". You were freed to enjoy and live for Him, not to sin (2 Corinthians 5:15). You serve a new and wonderful Master now. You weren't freed from jail so you could go out and kill again. Rather, you were set free so you could serve the One who bought you and redeemed you out of slavery.

Paul

"For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom as into an opportunity for the flesh". (Galatians 5:13) Christian liberty is the freedom *from* self, not the freedom to serve or indulge it. Unlike before salvation, you are now *able* to obey God (Romans 8:6-7 and Galatians 2:20).

"Don't let your liberty cause others to stumble". (I Corinthians 8:9) Since being set free, you and I are responsible to live in a way that reflects the character of God to a lost world. As such, our attitudes and actions should bring honor to the family name. Liberty does not include the freedom

to embarrass the name of Christ, or to hinder the progress of the Gospel. We have a responsibility to our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to a watching world (1 Peter 3:13-17).

James

"Even so, faith, if it has no works, is dead (faith), being by itself". (James 2:15-20) Our new life in Christ and the resulting spiritual fruit are part of the evidence that we have truly been made new. A new nature means new desires (2 Corinthians 5:17). And though we struggle and war within, our new, true self desires godliness (Romans 7:15-25; Psalm 37:4).

As a Christians, you shouldn't be asking, "How much can I sin and still consider myself a Christian?" You have been bought with a price, and no longer belong to yourself (I Corinthians 6:19-20). So now, all your good works, deeds and obedience to God's commands only enhance the experience of salvation you already have. You obey God now for spiritual growth, enjoyment, and to experience intimacy with Him, not for salvation merit.

So then what's the balance between grace and works in your life? Think of it this way: As you obey Scripture you do so on the basis of:

1. Your unconditional acceptance by God
2. Your freedom to serve Him
3. Your desire to obey Him
4. Your need for intimacy with Him

Having said that, what have you really been trusting in to get you to heaven? Christ, or your ability to follow Him? Do you live by a list of "do's" and "don'ts"? Is that what the Bible is to you? Do you compare yourself to others in order to make yourself feel good, spiritually? Are you using your freedom in Christ as an excuse to do as you please or to obey Him? Do you obey God because you're

supposed to, or because you love Him and are grateful to Him for what he has done for you through grace?

“All This For You”

Can you see now why is grace is such a great motivator for worship? Grace helps us realize our deep sin-debt, and the daily need for His provision and the wonder of His love for us. Jesus said he who has been forgiven much, loves much (Luke 7:47). Grace puts music to the lyrics of the Gospel. Together, truth and grace are like words and melody. And melody always makes a difference. If you doubt this, try singing the words to your favorite worship song to a sitcom melody. It doesn't have the same “feel”, does it? The same is true with the Gospel. The words of Scripture apart from the melody of grace God composed can become cold, hard, rigid and unattractive. But grace makes the difference. Grace makes the Gospel a song. It's a Gospel of Grace. And God never separates the two.

When truth is married to grace, a symphony of praise is ignited. As worshippers, we need both. That's why Peter exhorted us to “grow in the grace *and* knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”⁵ God meant for them to be inseparable, like two sides to the same coin. Seen this way, the ripple effects of grace never cease. The awesome character of God we discussed in the last chapter takes on deeper and more personal meaning as we realize this Great God is also our gracious Father. Worship then becomes an overflow of a relationship and a heart that has been changed.

So if you are a Christian, God is pleased with you because of Christ. Stop worrying. Stop trying to prove yourself to Him. He was completely satisfied at the cross with His Son's payment. You cannot add to it one single bit. He has made you acceptable through Christ. Period. You are holy in His sight. Forever. You stand before Him complete. God is at peace with you. He is not angry with you. You are His child, not His slave.⁶ You are justified, forgiven, adopted as a child of God,

redeemed, freed from the law and the power of sin, saved forever from condemnation and judgment, loved, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, accepted, holy, enjoying total access to God, experiencing Abba intimacy, raised up with Christ, possessing God's presence in you, having a relationship. All this is all a part of the beautiful benefit package you received at the moment of salvation. Therefore, you must embrace your status as a child of God, your destiny as an heir with Christ (John 1:12; Romans 8:16-17). It is impossible to grow in grace while we are still wrestling with our acceptance with God.

Contemplate this: A relationship with God, your Creator, Savior, Lord and Friend should be the most positive, fulfilling, exciting, liberating and enjoyable relationship you could possibly have. Grace transforms that relationship from a "have to" into a passionate, pleasureable pursuit.

Author Jerry Bridges wrote, "To live by grace is to live solely by the merit of Jesus Christ." I agree. So let grace fuel your worship. Know that you will never outgrow your need for a fresh, daily experience of His amazing grace. Dive into it. Bathe in it. Enjoy it!

¹ Paul also said he wished those false teachers would go "mutilate themselves." Harsh language, but in the theological context of Paul's argument, it actually was a "reasonable" response, considering that they were requiring believers to be circumcised as a necessary "add on" to salvation by faith. "Since you want believers to cut themselves to prove their salvation, why don't you guys just go ahead and go all the way and castrate yourselves!" (see Galatians 5:12)

² Romans 6:23

³ Matthew 15:9, NIV

⁴ For a more in-depth study on the sin nature – what it is, how it operates, and how to overcome it, see Jeff Kinley, *The Christian Zombie Killers Handbook – Slaying the Living Dead Within* (Thomas Nelson, 2011)

⁵ 2 Peter 3:18

⁶ Hebrews 12:4ff

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