

## 8. The Concept of God's grace

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When the Lord directed me to teach the Book of Genesis for the third time, He also impressed in my heart that we should do in-depth studies of His grace right after the studies of chapter 3.

Many people, believers or unbelievers alike, have heard the words "God's amazing grace" many times, yet the most of them cannot articulate the concept of God's grace, let alone how it saves the life of the believers; how it sanctifies them; how it set them free from many things that tangles them; how sufficient it is in our lives without any human inputs; how many legalistic people think that God's grace is risky, yet it is not; and finally, how we should accept His grace without any reservation as well as others'.

A good number of born-again Christians, citizens of heaven, who have been set free by the grace of God in Christ, have not learned how to cast off the bondage of their birth in Adam. They sing and talk about freedom, but they are still living under an oppressive system of religious rules.

This oppressive religious system is called legalism, and it's absolutely contrary to our freedom in Christ. But many Christians are being held hostage to the old regime. If there is one overarching truth I want to get across to you in this series of sermons, it is this: When you got saved, you were brought into a new regime. You have been liberated by "God's magnificent grace, and the old rules no longer apply."

I realize that applying the truth we know can be another story. So we need to understand what legalism is, and how it shackles us, before we can understand how to break its chains and fully appreciate the freedom we possess in Christ.

The Bible goes to great lengths to combat legalism and establish us in grace. So let's find out how to shed the shackles and be truly free.

### **A. THE DEFINITION OF GOD'S AMAZING GRACE**

Grace is acceptance without reservation, forgiveness without condemnation, pardon without probation. It is unrestrained love poured out on the undeserving. That is exactly what God has done for us through Jesus Christ our Lord. While we didn't deserve His love, He poured out his love upon us. While we were sinners, He extended His mercy upon us. While we were His enemy by our wicked nature, He draped us with His grace.

Grace never reads a long list of our sins. It doesn't point the finger of accusation. Grace comes to us as we are. It accepts us in our ugliness, wretchedness, and desperation. Grace truly is amazing.

Consider these truths about grace:

**1) Grace stoops to where we are and lifts us to where God is.**

Love that goes upward is worship.

Love that goes outward is affection.

Love that stoops is grace.

Grace bends to where we are, reaches into the pit of our wretchedness, lifts us out, and sets us on level ground before God – as righteous as His own Son. Can anything be more amazing than that?

## **2) Grace softens the harsh demands of the law and offers us hope to go on.**

Remember the story in John 8 of the woman caught in adultery. The disheveled, half-clothed, and frightened woman was dragged to Jesus by the self-righteous religious leaders. They stood with stones in their hands, ready to kill her and trying to set a trap for Jesus at the same time. Would He uphold the Law given by the One He claimed had sent Him? Or would He extend the grace He said He came to proclaim?

Not only did Jesus' words save the life of this woman, but His forgiveness gave her the courage to go on, despite her disgrace. It gave her the motivation to change her life.

## **3) Grace becomes our guide in responding to God and others.**

Grace is always greater than our own resources, our own pain, our own need – even our own sin. *Isaiah 1:18*

As He has forgiven us, so He wants us to forgive others. When we have experienced grace, we can give grace to others. *Luke 6:36*

## **B. THE BONDAGE OF LEGALISM**

*Galatians 3:3 Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?*

Legalism is trying to please God "by the flesh," by attempting to keep "a list of laws and rules that we think will earn us God's favor and keep us in good standing with Him. It is identity based on performance rather than relationship. It makes rule-keeping the basis of spiritual victory.

The problem with this should be obvious. We can't earn our salvation. We didn't begin with Christ by doing works of the flesh but by the grace of God administered by the Holy Spirit.

Wherever Paul went he was followed by Jewish teachers called Judaizers, who sought to subject Gentile Christians to the bondage of the Law of Moses. This is why Paul used such strong language.

*Galatians 3:1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?*

## **C. A GUILT AND OBLIGATION DRIVEN SYSTEM**

Let's not misunderstand here. Legalism is not merely the presence of the Law. God's Law is holy and righteous and good. The problem is that the Law provides no power to obey it.

Legalism is not the presence of rules but it reveals our wrong attitude toward the rules. Legalism assigns to the rules a power to produce obedience that God never gave them. Victory and true liberty cannot be found in human effort.

You see, legalism is a guilt-motivated system. We either allow others to put us in bondage to their list of rules, or we shackle ourselves to our own list.

Let me make an example for you: A Christian who tends toward legalism comes to our church one Sunday and hears me say, "You need to read your Bible and pray daily." This Christian feels guilty because he hasn't been reading his Bible and praying. So he sets his alarm back an hour that night. But when the alarm goes off the next morning, this guy doesn't really want to get up. He's kind of grumpy, but he dutifully staggers out of bed to read his Bible and pray because he feels that he has to.

Is there anything wrong with me telling you guys that you ought to read your Bibles and pray daily? No, absolutely not. And it's not necessarily bad that this Christian feels guilty for neglecting his spiritual life. That could be the conviction of the Holy Spirit. The problem comes in the way he deals with his need.

Listen carefully, please. Grace-based Christians obey because it's their delight. Law-based Christians obey because it's their duty. Grace-based Christians obey and love it. Law-based Christians obey and resent it. To grace-based Christians, the spiritual life is the lifting of a burden. But to legalistic Christians, living for God feels like carrying a heavy load.

Suppose both partners in a marriage carried around checklists of each other's duties and checked each duty off as it was done. If the whole marriage worked on that basis, I'd soon be seeing that couple in my office for counseling.

Husbands and wives who love each other help each other, but the doing has to grow out of the loving. God wants nothing less from us. If your Christian life is just a list, you're missing it – not necessarily because the things on your list are bad. It's just that living by a list is a faulty approach to victory in the Christian life.

#### **D. THE CONFUSION BEHIND LEGALISM**

Now that we know something about the nature of legalism, we need to ask an important question. If spiritual legalism is so confining and guilt-producing, why are so many Christians falling into this trap?

*Romans 6:14 For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.*

A lot of Christians would say, "Come on, preacher, I know that. That's one of the most basic principles of the Christian life. I'm not confused about that."

But I have to wonder how many believers really understand grace. If they did, they would realize they are free to follow Christ. But freedom scares some folk, like the freed slaves who wanted to stay with their slave masters because slavery was all they had ever known.

God wants us to understand that we are completely free from the Law. Not free to live any way we want, but free from trying to save ourselves by measuring up to God's perfect standard.

If many believers are confused about the true relationship between law and grace, they are also confused about the nature and the role of God's Law.

The first thing we need to restate and reinforce is that the problem is not in the Law itself. The Law of God is good – but if it can't save us, what is its purpose?

*Galatians 3:24 Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.*

The apostle also explained with a personal example in Romans 7:7-11. Paul's problem was coveting. He didn't feel the sinfulness of coveting until the Law told him, "You shall not covet." But he also discovered that law gave him no power to obey God. He found himself coveting worse than ever.

Our rebellious sinful nature gets excited when we are told not to do certain things. A good example: Speed Limit. By arousing the sinful nature we had before we came to Christ, the Law showed us how much we needed Christ. But the Law serves the same function for us now that we know Christ. Our old nature may be dead in Christ, but our new nature is still encased in a sin-ravaged body called the flesh. And our flesh still wants to rebel against God.

The Law is the mirror that shows us how bad we look without Christ. But a mirror doesn't comb our hair or brush our teeth. The Law reveals God's good and perfect standard and shows us how messed up we are, but the Law can't fix what it reveals.

### **E. THE CONSEQUENCES OF LEGALISM**

When you came to Jesus Christ, you died to the Law, so that it no longer has any authority over you. But the legalist who casts aside that freedom and puts himself back under the Law suffers the consequences.

*Galatians 5:1-4 Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. 2 Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. 3 And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. 4 You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.*

Legalism puts people under an impossible load. Who could possibly keep the whole Law? One consequence of legalism is the joyless bondage of trying harder, yet continually falling short.

Another consequence is even more serious. What does it mean to be "estranged from Christ," and "fallen from grace" in v4? These are two ways of saying the same thing. Legalism cuts us off from the flow of God's grace.

It's no coincidence that cult leaders control their people by putting them in bondage to their list of dos and don'ts. Pretty soon the followers are so dependent on the leader that they're incapable of relating to God or anyone else on their own. Legalists have the same basic problem. That is, they never know when they've done enough to earn God's favor. Legalism takes you backward in your relationship with God. It is not a way to please God but a problem to be corrected.

### **F. THE CORRECTION FOR LEGALISM**

Simply stated, the way to correct legalism is to maintain a relationship with God based on grace. Now, let me emphasize that such a relationship does not mean the absence of rules. It means that the rules grow out of the relationship, rather than being the basis of the relationship. It is love for our God that sustains a godly life.

When God saved you, He wrote His Law in your heart and mind. He wants to relate to you from the inside. What was previously merely an external code is now a matter of the heart, and it comes with the desire to obey and please God.

## G. REMINDERS

1) Love that goes upward is worship; Love that goes outward is affection; Love that stoops is grace.

2) Grace-based Christians obey because it's their delight. Law-based Christians obey because it's their duty. Grace-based Christians obey and love it. Law-based Christians obey and resent it. To grace-based Christians, the spiritual life is the lifting of a burden. But to legalistic Christians, living for God feels like carrying a heavy load.

3) The relationship between God and us through His grace does not mean the absence of rules. It means that the rules grow out of the relationship, rather than being the basis of the relationship. It is love for our God that sustains a godly life.