

INTRODUCTION:

In my younger years I thoroughly enjoyed watching movies such as King Solomon's Mines with Richard Chamberlain, Indiana Jones with Harrison Ford, Tomb Raider with Angelina Jolie, The Mummy with Brendan Fraser, National Treasure with Nicholas Cage, and Tin Tin starring well.... Tin Tin!

These were all exciting movies about adventure and archaeology, discovering the depths of mines, caves, historical crypts or graves and their treasures. And that's ultimately what the movie's plot is based around....thieves trying to steal the treasure contained in those depths. There is a name for people that do that kind of stuff.... And they are called "grave-robbers". Archaeologists often unearth an ancient tomb or crypt only to be disappointed that grave-robbers have long since looted many of the valuable artefacts.

But 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. The theological label given to these false teachers was, "**Judaizers**," because they were telling believers they had to live like law-abiding Jews before they could be real Christians. They were grace-robbers, and we have a new generation of them with us today. They stand in pulpits, teach Sunday School classes, write books, and 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. Because this is such a problem today, I'm going to devote several messages to this subject as I see it here in Colossians. Today will be more of an overview and next time we'll start to get very specific.

Let's read the Bible's warning found in Colossians 2:14-23:

"...having cancelled 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. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. Therefore [TIP: Never start reading the Bible at a place where you read, "therefore." Whenever you see that word, you have to be sure to read the verses preceding it. In other words you have to see what the therefore is there for!] do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. 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."

If you were here last week you remember we talked about what was nailed to the cross of Christ. In addition to our sin and shame, along with Satan's power, God also nailed all the Old Testament regulations to the cross. That means we have been liberated from having to observe the hundreds of trivial Old Testaments regulations we read in books like Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Remember, I said the moral law of God is still in effect: It is still wrong to murder, lie and steal. But the ceremonial laws of God have been repealed.

Although there are some grace-robbers today who insist we should still obey these obscure rules and regulations, most modern grace-robbers are those who have substituted a whole new set of rules like, "If you want God to accept you, you must go to church every Sunday, be baptized, give your money, read your Bible, and pray a certain number of times every day..."

Since I will be talking a lot about legalism, let's start with a working definition: **Legalism is the attitude that I can establish or improve my standing before God by my activities.** It's not an act— it's an attitude. If you think there is anything you can do to either establish a relationship or improve your relationship with God, you may have fallen into the trap of legalism. In this passage, we are introduced to three insidious grace-robbers.

GRACE-ROBBER #1: YOU GOTTA DO THIS TO BE SAVED! (14-17)

In the next lesson, I will go into much more detail about the specific examples of religious observances like eating, drinking, observing religious holidays, and observing the Sabbath. But in this overview, I'll examine the attitude that assumes there is something you can DO to be saved.

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: 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 says, ***"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."*** (1 John 2:2)

For the sake of discussion, if you think God has already done 99.999999999% of what's necessary for you to be saved and then it's up to you to do the remaining .00000001% then you don't understand grace. 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.

Paul's heart was broken for his Jewish brothers, because they were still trying to DO something to be right with God. He wrote: ***"They are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."*** (Romans 10:2-4)

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. ***For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. Eph 1:4***

Do you want to know what our part in salvation is? Watch this book. I'm going to drop it. Gravity is going to do its part and the book 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, we read about a man named Nicodemus who came to Jesus one night. He was an extremely religious man who tithed 30% of his income, and had the first five books of the Old Testament memorized. ***Jesus said, "You must be born again."*** Jesus compared salvation to being born. 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, August 12th 1975, 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 16th July 1989 when I was born again, but I really didn't DO anything!

Jesus told Nicodemus the work of the Spirit is like the wind blowing. So, why don't you go outside and let the cold Logan City wind blow in your face for a minute. And then you say, "Yep, I did my part and the wind did its part." Your "part" was just getting in the way of the wind. You didn't have any "part" in making the wind blow. In the same way, all I did was to get in the way of God's grace and it touched me and changed me.

You see, if you could burn one single calorie of effort to bring about your salvation, then you could take a tiny part of the credit and boast about your part. But it's all of God and none of us. The great British pastor Charles Spurgeon expressed it this way: *"If there be one stitch in the celestial garment of our righteousness which we are to insert ourselves, then we are lost. But this is our confidence: the Lord who began will perfect. He has done it all, must do it all, and will do it all.... To wash and dress a corpse is a far different thing from making it alive: Man can do the one, God alone can do the other."*

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." 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!

GRACE-ROBBER #2: YOU SHOULDA HAD THE SAME FEELING I HAD! (18-19)

The previous section spoke of the dangers of observing regulations, and this section warns about the dangers of exalting religious experiences above the truth of scripture. When we examine it more closely in a few weeks we'll talk about angel worship, visions, dreams, and ecstatic religious experiences. The general point of warning is about the danger of thinking that a "freaky religious feeling" that causes the hair to stand up on your neck, is normative. And of course, if you have that feeling, it's easy to insist that everyone else have it too...that is, if they are as spiritual as you.

Legalistic Lie: Everyone's spiritual experience must be identical.

Legalists believe every follower of Jesus Christ should look and act a certain way. They teach if you are truly right with God your experience will mirror their own pattern. The pattern varies from church to church. It may involve dressing a certain way, talking a certain way, or having some kind of "second blessing" experience.

Illustration: Perhaps you've seen the Matrix movies? Keanu Reeves plays Neo, a man who fights against an omnipotent computer trying to control the world. His opponent is a black-clad, sunglass wearing figure known only as "Agent Smith." Because Agent Smith is computer generated, there's not just one of him...there are dozens of identical Agent Smiths fighting against Neo. 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>Believe as I believe</i>	<i>No more no less.</i>	<i>That I am right</i>	<i>And no one else, confess.</i>
<i>Feel as I feel</i>	<i>Think only as I think.</i>	<i>Eat what I eat</i>	<i>And drink what I drink.</i>
<i>Look only as I look</i>	<i>Do always as I do;</i>	<i>Then and only then</i>	<i>Will I fellowship with you!</i>

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 6 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 humour! The Bible says this about God, ***"and there are varieties of activities (of the Spirit), but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone."*** (1 Corinthians 12:6 *The Message*)

Wouldn't life be boring if we were all clones of one another? So then, let us be careful not to become too rigid in spiritual experiences and think that everyone must have exactly the same experience as we did. Otherwise that will go on to become exalting experiences above the truth of Scripture. On the other hand, we must however be on guard against crazy spiritual (almost demonic) experiences that we just simply do not see in the Bible in NT Christianity. And be on guard against those who try to twist and interpret Scripture to say what they want it to say about their 'experience'. Stick with the Bible and you won't go wrong, but realise that God touches us all in different ways with experiences. There is an amazing diversity and beauty in the Body of Christ!

GRACE-ROBBER #3: YOU OUGHTA KEEP THE RULES! (20-23)

This final section addresses the grace-robber of rule keeping. I've said before a legalist is someone whose list of rules is longer than God's. Many 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.

Legalistic Lie: If I obey God, I'll earn more of His love!

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. But I must admit that there was a time when I believed that once you are saved, then there were things you must do if you wanted to continue to receive God's favour. 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.

I used to read that in certain churches they used to have an offering envelope they could place their donation into. But on the front of that envelope you could tick boxes that reported whether you were present at Church, on time, if you brought your Bible, had studied last week's sermon, and if you were staying for morning tea afterwards. I mean, if you got to tick a lot of those boxes it certainly would make you feel good about yourself, and I'm sure the person would be even more certain that God loved them a little bit more, because they've been so good during the week! That's how most of us got into this "performance based" legalism. When you perform you feel good about yourself, and when you don't you feel down, and you're certain that God is not happy with you. And that's legalism and misses the entire point about God's incredible love for mankind.

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 it into what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called, "Cheap grace." When you understand grace, you will want to obey God's commands. And Jesus said all the commands of the Old Testament can be summarized in these two: ***Love the Lord your God with all of your being, and Love your neighbour as yourself.***

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.

The Bible emphasizes repeatedly that our relationship with God is not based upon what we do, but on WHO He is. ***"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Romans 14:17)*** In other words, faith has nothing to do with what goes into your body: ***It has everything to do with Who lives in your heart. "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption." (1 Cor. 1:30)*** Jesus is my righteousness, because I could never be good enough on my own. Jesus is my peace, because I could never have security without Him. Jesus is my joy, because without Him, I would be of all men, most miserable.

CONCLUSION

Over the next few weeks, we'll cover this ground again in much more detail. But as I conclude this message, I'd like to give you a diagnostic test to see if you are leaning toward legalism. The test has only one question, and there's not really a right or wrong answer. Just answer it honestly for yourself: Q: How does God feel about me today? What's your answer? I'm not asking you how you feel about God; I'm asking you how you think God feels toward you right now. There is only one grace answer: A: He is passionately in love with me.

Did you come to church today because you were afraid if you didn't, God wouldn't love you quite as much? That's legalism. The truth is, God would still love you every bit as much right now if you had chosen to stay home, or go to the beach, or go the flea markets at Rocklea! Sure, the Bible speaks about the importance of gathering to worship, but grace says God loves us even while we are yet sinners.

Let me review the definition of legalism from the first of this message: Legalism is the attitude that I can establish or improve my standing before God by my activities. That attitude is a malicious grace-robber.

Maybe it would help to leave you with a definition of grace, too. You might want to write this down in your Bible, or at least burn it into your brain. I'm not going to say grace is "God's unmerited favour." Nor am I going to say that grace is "God's Riches At Christ's Expense." All those are true, but neither of those definitions fully conveys the meaning of grace. This week, I asked God to give me a simple, clear definition of grace; and I think He answered my prayer. Grace is...JESUS. Grace is not a power or a force—it's a Person. God loves you so much He sent His only Son into the world to suffer and die so He could enjoy a love relationship with you. The Bible says of Jesus, "*The Word became flesh...full of grace and truth.*" (John 1:14) In Jesus was all the fullness of God's grace, and when we allow Jesus to fill us then we are filled with God's grace. Don't let anyone or anything rob you of the blessing of God's amazing grace!