

We Are Free from Religious Rules

"I'VE SPENT MY WHOLE LIFE TRYING to do what God says. I didn't do all the things others did in college—drugs, premarital sex, the whole party scene. I have always attended church, read my Bible, prayed. I've done my best to live right, but in all these years I've never really felt like a good Christian. It seems that no matter how hard I try, there's this constant sense that something is missing in my life. Many of my friends who seem to have spent much of their lives doing their own thing have been blessed more by God than me. I don't understand it at all." As Paula spoke those words, I understood her sense of frustration. What she was experiencing were the classic effects of a legalistic understanding of the Christian life. It seemed to her that she should be blessed more; after all, she had tried harder than many to do the things she believed God expected.

After being reminded that God had already given Israel the land of Canaan, Joshua led the people farther in. The failure at Ai faded into the distance as the people traveled the 30-mile pilgrimage to the Valley of Shechem, one of the most beautiful places in Palestine. When they reached the valley, Joshua brought the people to a standstill. With Mount Ebal on one side and

Mount Gerizim on the other, the Valley of Shechem provides a natural amphitheater with such acoustics that a person can stand on the peak of Mount Gerizim and be heard clearly as he speaks softly to a person on the peak of Mount Ebal.

In that valley Joshua built an altar to the Lord, offered sacrifices, and then engraved the law of Moses into stone as the people watched. "Half of them stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal..." (Joshua 8:33). After carving the law into rock, Joshua "read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel..." (8:34-35).

Differences Between Law and Grace

As the people of Israel began their new life in Canaan, it was soon important to understand how their lives were to be led. They had wandered in rebellion for 40 years, and in the Valley of Shechem, Joshua brought their focus back to the law of God again. Standing before the people, he read every single word that God had spoken through Moses. He reminded them of the blessings of obeying God's law and the curses that would result if they disobeyed God's law.

Perhaps no area of biblical teaching about the Christian life is the focal point of more controversy than matters related to the law. Believers universally agree that keeping the law has nothing to do with salvation. We would all unanimously tell anybody who was trying to gain eternal life through his behavior that he was wasting his time and effort.

The differences of opinion about the law come in our different understandings of the Christian's relationship to the law

after he is saved. Some people read the passage in Joshua 8:32-35, where Joshua calls the people of God back to the law, and see a paragon for today's church. In fact, across Christendom many are crying out for the church to return to God's standards for living. Many vehemently contend that the reason for the lukewarm condition of many local churches has been our wandering away from God's laws. To many, their position sounds right; in fact, at first glance, it sounds biblical. Those who hold this view often stir the emotions of sincere Christians who want to see a revival in the church, causing them to say, "Yes, let's lift up the biblical standard in the church!" Many are easily led to believe that what we need is a return to God's laws.

Living under the law means building one's lifestyle around a system of religious rules in an effort to produce spiritual progress or earn God's blessings.

Is this the real need of the church? I don't think so. Before I explain why, let me demystify the meaning of the word *legalism*. To put it in the contemporary language of the modern church, we are talking here about religious rules, both biblical and extrabiblical. As we examine the relationship of the believer to the law, don't simply think about the codified laws of the Old Testament or even just the commands of the New Testament. Living under the law means building one's lifestyle around a system of religious rules in an effort to produce spiritual progress or earn God's blessings.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day were the perfect example. Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees were theologically conservative. They believed every word of the Bible and even memorized much of it. At first glance, their behavior was above reproach. They didn't simply *observe* the laws of the Bible; they were so intent on adherence to a righteous standard that they even *added* rules to the laws of Scripture. They prided themselves on their good behavior.

Another group that threatened the early church with its insistence on the Christian embracing the law was the Judaizers. So pervasive was their influence in the church at Galatia that Paul was motivated to write a scathing letter to that church, denouncing the false teaching of legalism. Many have suggested that the book of Galatians was written to set straight a misunderstanding in the Galatian church about how a person becomes a Christian. That was not the issue, however. These people were *already* Christians and Paul knew it. Why would he think they were confused about how a person is saved? He was the one who had shared the gospel with them and seen them be born again. Paul didn't think they were confused about what it takes to be saved. That had been settled. Their misunderstanding was about how a person is to live the Christian life *after* he is saved. Paul's denouncing of legalism addressed the means of sanctification, not salvation.

The Judaizers had probably told the Galatian saints, "We know that you received Christ under the ministry of Paul. We are happy for you, but you need to understand that Paul is an evangelist, a church planter. His goal was to see you become Christians, but now you must grow spiritually and go forward in your walk of faith. We have come to teach you *how* to do that." It was at this point that Paul felt compelled to write and attack their teaching with a vengeance. In the first paragraph of his letter to the Galatians, he zeros in on the problem in their church:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ (Galatians 1:6-7).

Do We Focus on Relationship or Rules?

Paul said that the problem in the Galatian church was that the believers were *deserting* Him. They were turning away from Jesus Christ and focusing their attention on religious rules. They had understood perfectly the sole place of grace when they were saved, but now were being led to believe that their spiritual growth and maturity depended on themselves and what they did. Paul challenged them:

You crazy Galatians! Did someone put a hex on you? Have you taken leave of your senses? Something crazy has happened, for it's obvious that you no longer have the crucified Jesus in clear focus in your lives. His sacrifice on the Cross was certainly set before you clearly enough. Let me put this question to you: How did your new life begin? Was it by working your heads off to please God? Or was it by responding to God's Message to you? Are you going to continue this craziness? For only crazy people would think they could complete by their own efforts what was begun by God (Galatians 3:13 THE MESSAGE).

“How did our new life begin?” he asks them. Paul *knew* that they had indeed received new life. This proves his concern wasn't about their understanding of salvation, but about their walk. In his remarks to the Galatians, Paul makes it clear that when we place our focus on religious rules, we are forsaking Jesus Christ. Our focus is to be on our relationship to Him, not rules.

Every time the disciples started establishing rules—no children near Jesus; don't let the crowd touch Jesus; don't talk to Samaritan women; don't let people waste expensive perfumes—Jesus told them to knock it off, and His rebuke was usually followed by a lecture that said, "You still don't get it! We're not substituting religious rules with our rules. We are substituting religious rules with *Me!*" Jesus kept saying "Follow *Me*," not "Follow My rules." So most of us have spent our Christian lives learning what we can't do instead of celebrating what we can do in Jesus.¹

It has already been mentioned that many Christians believe the reason so many local churches are lukewarm is because they have wandered away from God's laws. These Christians, often very sincere, contend that the need in the church is to return to God's law. Consider the words of Jesus to a lukewarm church in Asia Minor:

I know...that you are neither cold nor hot.... Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me (Revelation 3:15,20).

Jesus did not tell the lukewarm church at Laodicea that their need was to return to the laws of God. He told them that their need was to return to Him! Revelation 3:20 is not written to the unbeliever, although it has been used many times as an evangelistic verse. This verse was written to a lukewarm church that had shut Christ outside. Their great need was not to commit to religious rules, but to live out of the relationship they had with Jesus by appropriating the intimate union they already had objectively but weren't experiencing subjectively at the moment.

Remember Paula, who was frustrated because she had tried to do all the right things yet still felt that something was missing in her life? She was bewildered and discouraged about how her life seemed to lack the blessings enjoyed by many of her friends. She thought that based on her moral record, she was more deserving than they were. Paula had *done* the right things, but her words betrayed the fact that she believed God's blessings were somehow connected to a merit system based on behavior.

Jesus said in John 8:32, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Note that the truth sets us free. Nothing so holds many believers in spiritual bondage as do the lies of legalism. The only thing that will set us free from the penitentiary of legalism is the key of grace.

Jesus Didn't Come to Help Christians Keep God's Laws

The position of many in the modern church is that God has forgiven our sins and given us Jesus to help us do the things He wants us to do. These Christians spend their whole lives trying to make sure they know *what* God wants them to do and not do. Once they have found what they believe is the road to righteous behavior, they ask Jesus to help them travel that road. They totally miss the fact that Jesus didn't give us eternal life so that we would know what to *do*; He gave us eternal life so that we could know *Him* by sharing His life (see John 17:3).

One glaring problem with this approach is in finding the right road. As already mentioned, there are many varying opinions in the modern church about what constitutes godly living. What is acceptable to one group of Christians is completely offensive to another. If you are going to try to build your lifestyle around religious rules, whose rules are you going to follow? "I will live by what

the Bible says," one may smugly answer. However, it should be acknowledged that all who seek to live by legalistic standards claim the Bible as their source of authority.

I was speaking on the dangers of legalism in a church, when someone approached me and said, "Steve, I want to give you something. This is what every new member receives at the church where I regularly attend. I think you'll find it interesting." I looked at the brochure she handed me, which was titled "Truth About Standards: Biblical Standards for Christians." The brochure listed 51 rules for Christians to live by in order to "keep our banner of victory waving high."² Below are the last nine of the 51 standards this group believes are important to godly living:

43. Biblical reason not to participate in worldly amusements, such as ball games, rodeos, circuses, racetracks, bowling alleys, skating rinks, theaters, video game rooms, etc.
44. Biblical reason not to go dancing, mixed bathing, etc.
45. Biblical reason for men to cut their hair short.
46. Biblical reason for women not to cut their hair but to let it grow long.
47. Biblical reason not to dye your hair.
48. Biblical reason not to wear clothing that pertaineth to the opposite sex.
49. Biblical reason to wear decent, modest clothes with modest styles; moderate prices and colors; decent dress lengths, sleeve lengths, and neck lines.
50. Biblical reason not to wear jewelry.
51. Biblical reason not to wear makeup.

Most evangelical Christians would consider this kind of list to be absurd—the idea that God is against ball games and rodeos? That He cares what color a lady's dress may be? It is important to realize that this list of religious rules isn't absurd to those who embrace it. They list numerous verses to prove the validity of each of their points.³

Having looked at this particular group's blueprint for living, I ask you this question: What is *yours*? "Oh," one may say, "I would never build my life around such a foolish list of rules. I simply try to do what the Bible *clearly* says." That is exactly what these brothers would say if questioned about their rules. The truth of the matter is that in the eyes of God, the legalism in our lives looks just as absurd to Him as theirs for one simple reason: Our lifestyle is not to be built on rules! Life is not about finding and keeping the *right* set of rules. Our life exists in our union with Jesus Christ. Everything is to flow out of that.

Jesus didn't come to help us keep the law; He came to deliver us from it. When we trusted Him by faith, the old man who was married to the law was put to death so that we have no relationship to it anymore. The law is alive, but the "old you" who was married to it is not. "You also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you might be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God" (Romans 7:4). Because of our co-crucifixion with Jesus Christ, believers have absolutely no relationship to the law at all—none (see Romans 3:28; 6:14; 7:6; 8:3-4; 10:4; Galatians 2:21; 3:13,21; 5:18; 1 Timothy 1:9). Our commitment is to Christ alone.

Does Grace Cause Us to Be Against the Law?

Sometimes those who embrace the grace of God and insist that the believer is freed from all connection to the law are accused of

being against the law. *Antinomianism* is the word first made popular during the Reformation to describe those who are against the law. The word comes from two Greek words, *anti*, meaning “against,” and *nomos*, meaning “law.” Is it true that those who understand that Christians have no relationship to the law anymore are *against* it? Absolutely not.

Nothing so holds many believers in spiritual bondage as do the lies of legalism. The only thing that will set us free from the penitentiary of legalism is the key of grace.

After the apostle Paul made the bold declaration in Romans 7:1-5 that Christians are dead to the law, he asked the question he knew people were thinking: “Is the Law sin?” Then he answers (in the same verse), “May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law” (Romans 7:7). Paul affirms that those Christians who understand that believers are dead to the law are not against the law. They simply believe that it is important to properly understand the role of the law.

In chapter 7 of this book we clearly saw that in Christ, every believer has been made righteous. We have been given holiness as a gift in the person of Jesus. Paul plainly says in 1 Timothy 1:9, “[The] law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are lawless and rebellious.” The law is not made for the Christian. We have no relationship to it whatsoever, yet the law still remains. Occasionally I will hear someone say that the law has been done away with, but that statement is false. It wasn’t the law that died,

it was *you* who died! We died with Jesus Christ on the cross, thus ending our life with the law.

The law still serves a divine purpose in the world today, but its design is no longer directed toward those of us who are believers. The target of the law is the person outside the family of God. The divine intent of the law in the lives of unbelievers is twofold.

The Law Is Intended to Stimulate Sin

Many have believed that God gave His law to control sin in man, but the Bible teaches that the opposite is the case. What was God's reason in giving the law? "The Law came in that the transgression might increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:20-21).

The law completes its job in a person's life when it causes him to see himself as utterly sinful and he turns to faith in Christ. Once that has been accomplished, he is no longer under the tutelage of religious rules.

God didn't give the law to subdue sin, but to *stimulate* it. Paul said that the law came into the world in order that transgressions might *increase*, not decrease. Law stimulates sin; it increases it in the lives of those who live under it. Do you know where sin gets its power? From the law! First Corinthians 15:56 says that "the power of sin *is* the law" (emphasis added). Paul said in Romans 7:5

that sinful passions are “aroused by the Law.” Why would God give His law knowing that men wouldn’t keep it, but that the law would only cause sin to “become utterly sinful” (Romans 7:13)? It is in order to bring men to Christ.

Trying to keep religious rules can never be a gateway to righteousness—neither before nor after salvation. The law is intended to bring the sin of an unsaved man’s wicked heart to the surface. It doesn’t generate sin, it only stimulates what is already there in order to make it known. If I put my thumb over an opened bottle of Coca-Cola and shake the bottle, what will happen? The cola will spew out of the bottle. Now, I didn’t *create* the cola. I only gave it the necessary stimulation to bring it out of the bottle. That’s what the law does in a person’s life. Its intent is to cause one to see his sin and realize his need for Christ. Paul said:

Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor (Galatians 3:24-25).

The law completes its job in a person’s life when it causes him to see himself as utterly sinful and he turns in faith to Christ. Once that has been accomplished, he is no longer under the tutelage of religious rules.

The Law Ministers Death and Condemnation

The other chief purpose of the law is to heap condemnation and guilt on those who live under its reign. The New Testament calls the law a ministry of death and condemnation (see 2 Corinthians 3:7,9). As one who was a longtime resident of the wilderness of religious legalism, I have walked with the law as my companion for many years. I have heard its whisper in my mind, constantly pointing out my shortcomings. I became so familiar

with its voice that, for a long time, I made the mistake of thinking its voice inside me was my own.

When I was a pastor in local churches, I would often hear the voice of law speaking to me about my personal life and ministry. I would be reading my Bible, when law would say to me, "You seem to be spending a lot of time in the Bible lately."

"Yes," I would reply.

"Well, what about prayer?" the voice would say.

"Well, that's important too," I would respond. So I would determine to divide my time between Bible study and prayer.

Then the voice would whisper, "You must not care that the world around you is going to hell."

"Why?" I would ask. The voice would respond, "Because you're spending your time reading the Bible and praying, but you don't give evangelism much priority in your life."

"I guess that's right," I would concede. So then I would try to divide my time between Bible study, prayer, and evangelism.

The haunting voice would return: "Some kind of pastor you are. You seem to value those outside the church more than you do those elderly members you are to care for in your church." So then I would try to take more time to visit with the older members of my congregation. Then came the voice again: "Don't you care about the youth? They are the hope of tomorrow." So then I would try to reach out to the youth of our congregation. On and on this lifestyle I called "ministry" went, with the perpetual voice inside my head demanding, "More! More! More!"

Do you see the dilemma? When we allow our lives to be assessed by how well we measure up to a list of responsibilities we imagine we owe to God, we will always feel an overshadowing sense of condemnation. No Christian will ever live up to the picture of the person that law describes, because the law is perfect and thus paints a picture of a perfect person, which we must be if we

are to meet its demands. When we impose religious rules upon ourselves, demanding that we perform up to a certain standard, we will discover that if we happen to jump the hurdle this time, law will simply raise the bar. There can never be a sense of satisfaction and joy when we try to live by religious rules because we can never do enough. When we walk with law, there will always be the stench of death inside us as we watch our joy waste away.

It Takes a Joshua to Guide Us into Grace-Land

Joshua called the children of Israel back to the law of God, a reminder that while Canaan is a type of God's grace-land in many ways, it is an imperfect type. Saints today are never called to the land of religious rules and regulations. Paul asked the Colossian church, "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 yourselves to decrees [religious rules], such as, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!' (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?" (Colossians 2:20-22). His question is simple: You have died to a system of religious rules, so why are you acting like you still have some connection to them?

The fact that it was Joshua who led Israel into Canaan is a striking illustration of how we entered into the land of grace. It wasn't possible for them to enter the land until the change of leadership from Moses to Joshua. Moses *could not* lead them into the promised land. Why? Consider the role of Moses in the life of Israel. Even until today he is primarily known as the Lawgiver. If I were to ask you to describe what you see in your mind when I say the name *Moses*, you might imagine Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*, coming down from the mountain with the tablets in his hands.

For almost 40 years Moses had told the people what they needed to do, but they often rebelled against his leadership. At times he became angry and impatient with them. He told them where they needed to go, but he couldn't get them there. He is a graphic personification of the law. Trying to keep religious rules can never lead you into the abundant life that Jesus offers. They can point out where you are failing and tell you where you ought to be, but have no ability to lead you into that place.

The Old Testament name *Joshua* is the Hebrew equivalent of the New Testament name *Jesus*. It's the same name! Jesus is our Joshua. He is the One who leads us into the land of grace where God intends for us to live forever. So stop focusing on religious rules. You have died to that system. Jesus Christ is your life now. Understanding that we are dead to the law, the only thing needed to experience victory is to understand how God intends for believers to live. We live by a different kind of law, which is called the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.



Dear Father,

I see how subtly religious rules can turn my attention from You and onto my behavior. I know that You are the Source of godly living. I turn from confidence in rules and now rest in my relationship to You. Lord Jesus, You are my Joshua. I will gladly follow You into the land where I live by grace and not laws.

G.R.A.C.E. Group Questions

1. Read Galatians 3:1-3. In what ways do many in the modern church try to move forward in their lives by self-effort?
2. Read John 17:3 and 1 John 1:1-2. What is the meaning of eternal life?
3. This chapter lists "biblical standards" embraced by one group of people. Around what rules have you attempted to build your own life? Does the church you attend have a set of rules to follow? What are they? What does the Bible say about living by religious rules? (Cite references.)
4. Name and discuss two purposes of the law. Cite biblical references to prove your answer.
5. Describe how you have felt when you've tried to live by religious rules.