

BECAUSE OF HIS AMAZING GRACE...

# *We Can Do As We Please*

“LAWLESSNESS! THAT’S WHAT YOU’RE teaching!” This is the kind of accusation no one wants to hear when he is teaching the Bible.

“I’m not teaching lawlessness,” I responded to the pastor, whose voice had gotten louder as he talked about my teaching on legalism.

“So you’re not against the law?” he persisted. “No, absolutely not,” I responded. “The law is given by God and is a very good thing *in its place*, but it has no place in the life of a Christian.”

The pastor simply couldn’t accept what I was saying. After our conversation ended, he was still angry and I was left with that sinking feeling that comes from being blasted by someone.

In the last chapter, I presented several verses that state that Christians are no longer under the law. In church settings, where the focus is heavily centered on Judeo-Christian values, the message of freedom from the law is not popular. However, we must allow the Bible to be our final authority, even if it contradicts what we have always believed or been taught. We as New Testament believers haven’t been called to religious rules grounded in Judeo-Christian values; we have been called to the Person of

Jesus Christ. “Come to *Me*” is the call from Jesus (see Matthew 11:28, emphasis added).

After Israel defeated both Jericho and Ai, Joshua turned his attention southward. By this time, five Canaanite kings had become very scared by the alliance Joshua had made with the Gibeonites (see Joshua 9). Therefore they united together to declare war on Gibeon, which immediately sent a call for help to its new ally, Joshua. Assured of God’s promise of victory, Joshua came up from Gilgal, his base of operations, and defeated and chased the enemy. Then followed one of the greatest battles of all history, in which God deliberately intervened on behalf of His people. He delayed nightfall and lengthened the day in order that victory would be utterly complete and final. The five kings were captured and imprisoned.<sup>1</sup> Humanly speaking, the odds against the Israelites had been insurmountable. The key to their victory is found in the words “the LORD fought for Israel” (Joshua 10:14).

### Our Source of Life Is Christ, Not Rules

Joshua and the Israelite soldiers were beginning to learn that the normal rules of engagement in battle don’t fit when you add God to the equation. So it is for the believer who left behind the wilderness of religion. Law governs the realm outside of God’s grace-land, but once we have entered into Christ, the old rules for moral living don’t apply anymore.

Does it startle you to consider that rules of morality don’t apply to believers? Christians aren’t called to live a *moral* lifestyle. Moral living began in the garden of Eden when man ate from the *forbidden* tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (see Genesis 2:16-17). Before that time, Adam and Eve didn’t even know right (good) from wrong (evil). Note that the tree provided the *knowledge* of good and evil. It offered acquaintance

with right and wrong, something Adam and Eve had never considered or even known to consider. Since they didn't know right from wrong, which did they do: live moral lives before the fall, or immoral? Neither; they lived *miraculous* lives. Their actions flowed from the union they shared with God. They had no relationship to rules of morality before the fall. Their behavior transcended morality as they experienced the living God as their only Life-Source. Their behavior wasn't simply good, it was *godly*—a much higher level of life than human goodness.<sup>2</sup>

Then came the fall of man, after which mankind's definitive question revolved around whether an action is good or evil. Many Christians today live by that question, desiring to always do right and not wrong. However, it is important to note that even good behavior might be a sin if the action in question doesn't originate from Christ's indwelling life within the believer. Any conduct that doesn't originate from our union with Him is not from faith, and "whatever is not from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). One may keep all the religious rules he can find, and still be living in sin. "The righteous man shall live by faith. However, the Law is not of faith..." (Galatians 3:11-12). So to try to build our lives around religious rules is a sin!

Jesus Christ came to reverse the damage done by Adam. He came to restore us to God's original plan—that we should find our complete life in Him, not in rules outlining good and evil. Major Ian Thomas says:

Beware lest even as a Christian, you fall into Satan's trap!  
You may have *found* and come to *know* God in the Lord  
Jesus Christ, receiving Him sincerely as your Redeemer,  
yet if you do not enter into the mystery of godliness and  
allow God to *be* in you the origin of His own image, you  
will seek to be godly by submitting yourself to external

rules and regulations and by conforming to behavior patterns imposed upon you by the particular Christian society that you have chosen and in which you hope to be found "acceptable." You will in this way perpetuate the pagan habit of practicing religion in the energy of the flesh, and in the very pursuit of righteousness commit idolatry in honoring "Christianity" more than Christ!<sup>3</sup>

Major Thomas asserts that if a believer tries to do the right thing and observe all his religious rules, he may inadvertently practice the habits of a pagan. He may unwittingly commit idolatry by honoring the Christian religion without honoring Christ. Moral living can be godless living. Many religious cult members in contemporary society live moral lives above reproach, proof that God's call to the believer *must* be something more than an invitation to morality. He would never lead us down to the level of morality. We don't even *need* Christ to be moral. We can *do right* without Him, but we can't *be righteous*. We can live a *good* life apart from Him, but will never know a *godly* life.

### The Subtle Substitute

Christ is our life (see Acts 17:28; Galatians 2:20; Philippians 1:21; Colossians 3:4). To become obsessed with anything other than *Him* is idolatry, even if that other obsession is religious rules. Perhaps the greatest danger in the American church is that we have lost our focus on Jesus Christ and have been focusing more on "Christian values," which is merely morality by another name.

There are morality gurus in American culture who are being touted as examples for us all, including Christians. One famous radio personality hosts a syndicated daily talk show during which she advises her callers about how they can resolve their

moral dilemmas by applying the biblical laws of morality and decency. Seldom could anyone who embraces Judeo-Christian values disagree with her assessments and moral prescriptions. However, the *complete* preeminence that she gives to the place of moral (and often biblical) law is apparent. She speaks openly about her faith and active role in Judaism. She is a capable ambassador of the law. She may be the greatest preacher of morality in America today. There is only one thing missing in her religious advice—Life! With cold, hard facts she does an excellent job of telling people that they should move from the evil branch on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to the good branch. However, the law always leads a person up the wrong tree! God wants us to live in the tree of life—the life of His Son.

*The law is given by God and is a very good thing  
in its place, but it has no place in the life of a Christian.*

What people need isn't a change in their behavior. They need a new life-source. I don't blame the radio host for what she tells her callers. She is speaking from her own personal frame of reference, which is the Old Testament law. I *am* puzzled by the many Christians who applaud her work as if she were pointing people toward God's purpose for their lives. God's desire has never been to bring people to morality; it has always been to bring people to Himself through Jesus Christ. We shouldn't allow ourselves to assume that God has won the battle when a person's behavior is changed from bad to good. He longs to give every person something far greater than a clean life (by human standards). He wants to give them Christ's life.

## Freedom Is Scary to the Religionist

The pastor who accused me of teaching lawlessness expressed his fear during our conversation: "If you don't teach people to live by godly principles, their behavior will become worldly. They will fail to be the righteous people that God has called us to be." I understood exactly where he was coming from because that had been my own perspective for many years. It sounded to him like I was suggesting that a Christian's behavior doesn't matter, which is not the case. The conduct of a Christian is *very* important. It should be an expression of the life of Jesus Christ within us.

The pastor's concern that people might fail without the help of religious rules shows his lack of understanding about the means by which we become righteous. We have already seen that righteousness doesn't come by what we do; it is who we *are* as believers. We aren't called to live by principles, but by the life of Jesus Christ, who is within us. As we do that, our behavior will transcend morality and will be miraculous.

Our need is simply to behave like who we are. To attempt to build one's life around principles is an attempt to live up to the same old law, called by another name. Whether law is called principles, rules, standards, or anything else, when our goal is to live up to any behavioral requirement for the purpose of making spiritual progress or gaining God's blessings, we have fallen prey to legalism.

Any fear that grace will lead to sin is unfounded. Grace never causes a person to become careless in conduct. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, *instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires* and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:11-12, emphasis added). When a person is abiding in Jesus Christ, trusting Him to animate his every action, he may do whatever he wants to do because the desires of Christ become his own.

God can propose *absolute* liberty to the one in whom He is so working that the innermost choice is only that which He wills for him. Having molded the desires of the heart, He can give His child unbounded freedom. There is no other freedom in the world but this. By the inwrought "fruit of the Spirit," God Himself has determined the desires of his heart. The outworking of those desires will be according to His own energizing power.<sup>4</sup>

The title of this chapter is not original with me. It was Augustine who first said, "Love God and do as you please." This kind of statement sounds radical outside of God's land of grace. The religionists of every generation will unanimously shriek in horror, "Do as you please?" Because of a deeply ingrained affinity for the law, they never hear the first part of the statement: *Love God* and do as you please. When a person loves God, doing as he pleases is to do that which pleases God.

### How Are We to Live?

If we as believers are not to live by religious rules, then how should we live? The key to Israel's victory over the five kings in Joshua 10 was that "the LORD fought for Israel" (10:14). God led them to the place where He wanted them so that they would *experience* the victory He had already given them. There, *He* overcame Israel's enemies. Just as it had been at Jericho, there was no doubt that God was the One who had won the battle.

God's intended pattern for our lives is displayed throughout the Bible. He wants to be the Source of all our behavior. His desire is that we live by His life, depending totally upon Him to enable us to be all that He has called us to be and to do all that He has called us to do. God delights in our dependence upon Him.

To understand that we don't need to struggle to live a godly lifestyle—but can simply trust Jesus Christ to be Himself in and through us—takes tremendous pressure off those of us who have been struggling under the burden of religious rules. This revelation will cause us to experience the rest that is inherent to the gospel. Grace means that God does it all. What a relief to those of us who have lived in the wilderness of demanding religion! Donald McCullough said:

Grace means that in the middle of our struggle the referee blows the whistle and announces the end of the game. We are declared winners and sent to the showers. It's over for all huffing, puffing piety to earn God's favor; it's finished for all sweat-soaked straining to secure self-worth; it's the end of all competitive scrambling to get ahead of others in the game. Grace means that God is on our side and thus we are victors regardless of how well we have played the game. We might as well head for the showers and the champagne celebration.<sup>5</sup>

The good news of grace is applicable to every child of God. We don't have to huff and puff, working to keep the rules. In the Bible, the word "gospel" means "good news," and the best news that any of us can hear is that we don't have to struggle to keep the law. God has released our obligation to the law by the cross (see Romans 7:6). There we died to the law and have been restored to the union not known between man and God since the fall. Now we live out of that oneness we share with Him.

### Does a Dead Man Keep the Law?

Before Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, did they keep or break the law? It has already been

established that their behavior wasn't moral, but miraculous. They didn't break the law; neither did they keep it. The law existed only within the forbidden tree, from which they had not yet eaten. They lived in union with God, a place where the law had no presence.

*Jesus Christ came to restore us to God's original plan—that we should find our complete life in Him, not in rules outlining good and evil.*

Since Jesus Christ has reversed for the believer the spiritual sabotage unleashed by Adam, where does that leave us in relation to the law? Do Christians today keep the law? None would argue that we aren't to break the law, but do we *keep* it? Remember that the Christian has no relationship to the law whatsoever. Some believe that as we live in Christ, we *will* keep the law. Even after understanding my identity in Christ, I held that view for quite some time, but I have come to be convinced that this viewpoint carries a subtle danger with it. To suggest that we keep the law implies that we still have some relationship to it, albeit a positive relationship. However, the Bible teaches that we have no relationship to the law at all—neither negative (breaking it) or positive (keeping it). We are *dead* to the law.

I know someone who never breaks a single law of the land. He never drives above the speed limit, never litters, never disturbs the peace, never does anything wrong at all. One might be inclined to say that he keeps all the laws, but I could argue the point. The

person I'm thinking of is my grandfather. I'll tell you one more thing about him: He died years ago. Possessing that knowledge, would you say that he is keeping the laws of the land? Probably not, because you now know that he has no relation to the laws of the land anymore. They simply have no relevance to where he lives today, in heaven. He has been "disconnected" from the law by virtue of his death. It would be absurd to insist that he is keeping the law just because he doesn't break it.

So it is with the life of a believer. We have been made to die to the law by our co-crucifixion with Jesus Christ. We have no relationship to it at all. If a believer doesn't commit adultery, murder, or countless other sins, does this mean that he is keeping the law? Not unless we take the absurd approach of evaluating his behavior on those terms. We don't live in the land of law anymore. Instead, we live in the land of grace—a place where the law has no relevance and no connection to us at all. The law ruled in the darkness of our legalistic wilderness wanderings, but we no longer live there. "He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13).

### Christians Live by a Higher Law

Does this suggest that the Christian lives a lawless lifestyle? Regarding any religious rules that might govern one's life, we live under a new covenant in which the law has become obsolete to us (see Hebrews 8:13). We are in Christ, who is our life. Rules have no place there because there is no *need* for law for the person who lives in union with a Holy God. The law exists in another dimension, one from which we have been removed. The citizens of God's grace-land live by a higher law called the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (see Romans 8:2). The only law of the Spirit *is* the life of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul called it "the law

of Christ" (see 1 Corinthians 9:21; Galatians 6:2). Christ is the only law by which we live, but His life is sufficient! As we depend upon Him to be our Life-Source, our behavior will be godly and righteous. It will be *miraculous* because by Him we will be equipped to live above our own human capabilities.

The law of Christ is a completely different type of law than that espoused from the standpoint of legalism. To compare the two is like comparing the law of the judicial system with the law of gravity—they just can't be related. The word *law* may be the same, but the concept is totally different. The law of Christ is not one that *insists* we behave in a certain way, but rather *inspires* us to live a godly lifestyle. It is no longer a matter of what we *ought* to do; now our choice to live a righteous lifestyle is because we *want* to do it. Don't try to lay a list of rules on a resident of the new land. He will tell you to keep your religious rules. He doesn't need them. As a citizen of grace-land, he can do as he pleases, but don't be concerned about his behavior. Watch him and you'll discover that *as he abides in Christ*, to do as he pleases is to live in godliness. Rules have nothing to do with it. Relationship is what motivates him.

### Do I Have to Kiss My Wife?

Suppose I were to ask for some marital advice. The imaginary conversation might go like this: "I travel a lot, speaking in various places. I'm wondering about something. When I come home, do I have to kiss my wife?"

"You probably *should*," might be the response.

"Oh, okay," I reply. "Should it be a kiss on the mouth or on the cheek?"

"Probably on the mouth," one might answer.

"Understood," I say. "Can it be a short little peck on the lips or does it need to be one of those long, romantic, movie-type kisses?" I persist.

By now my counselor might pause and ask, "Steve, is there something *wrong* between you and Melanie?"

Who needs to ask advice like that? Not me! When I know Melanie is going to meet me at the airport, as she does each time I return home, I don't sit on the airplane as it arrives at the gate and pray, "Lord, lead me in what I should do now. Give me the wisdom to know what You want me to do and the strength to do it." It has never happened. When I see my beautiful wife, I kiss her. I mean I really *kiss* her. It's not the desire to be a good Christian husband or the goal to fulfill some responsibility in marriage that motivates me. It's love.

*When a person is abiding in Jesus Christ, trusting Him to animate his every action, he may do whatever he wants to do because the desires of Christ become his own.*

Don't try telling me the laws of marriage. I don't want to hear them. They have nothing to do with me. I love my wife. The same is true in our relationship to Christ. In Jesus Christ, the laws don't mean anything, but faith working through love means everything (see Galatians 5:6). Ray Stedman wrote:

Love makes obedience easy; it is the delight of love to do what the loved one desires. Therefore, when the heart grows dull and obedience is difficult, the proper

response of the Christian is not to grit his teeth and decide to tough it out, but to remember who it is that asks this of him, and then for his sake to do it. When a Christian responds this way, he will find to his amazement that his own attitude has changed. A new outlook is born within him.<sup>6</sup>

The relationship we have with Jesus Christ is the impetus for a godly lifestyle. For the believer who is abiding in Christ, it is a delight, and not a duty, to live a lifestyle of obedience. Are there commandments in the Christian life? Of course; the New Testament gives commands for the believer, but because we love Jesus, “His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). When a man is in love and his wife says, “Come here and kiss me *now!*” it won’t be a burden for him to fulfill her command. There’s no *law* in that command. To quote Stedman and to put it gently, when a person obeys God he will discover that “a new outlook is born within him.” As the bride of Christ who *loves* Him, when the Lord tells us to do something, it is our *pleasure* to be obedient.

The Israelites moved forward toward Gibeon to face the five opposing kings and the Lord fought for them, suspending all the natural rules of engagement normally observed by an army. Their success at Gibeon was overwhelming. Judged on the basis of normal rules of battle, it made no sense. However, Joshua and his army had come to the point where they knew that when God is your Source, universally accepted rules become irrelevant.

Indeed, when God is our Source, the only thing that matters is Him. Consequently, it would seem that our greatest need may well be to grow in our knowledge of Him and how He operates in our lives—a lesson Israel was about to learn.



*Dear Father,*

*Thank You for the liberty You have given me as a Christian. I affirm that I am dead to the law and live completely by the life of Jesus Christ, who is within me. Cause me to grow in grace so that the desires of Jesus will be my constant desires. It is my pleasure to be obedient to You because I love You.*

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

1. Read Genesis 2:16-17. What did this tree offer to Adam and Eve? Why was it God's purpose they should not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?
2. Read Galatians 3:11-12. Why is it a sin for the Christian to build his life around religious rules? Is the law sinful? Explain the purpose of the law.
3. Why is trying to get people to live by Judeo-Christian values a wrong goal for Christians? What should be the goal of believers in their relationships with those outside of Christ?
4. What is Christian liberty? Does grace imply that a believer can live a sinful lifestyle without it making any difference in his life? Read Romans 6:1-3 and discuss its meaning.
5. Do Christians keep the law? Do we break the law? Read Romans 8:2 and discuss what it means to live by the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.