



CONTENTS

1. The Concept of Grace	7
2. Saved by Grace	19
3. Sanctified by Grace	27
4. Set Free by Grace	37
5. The Sufficiency of Grace	49

1

THE CONCEPT OF GRACE

A man who had been born and raised in a country ruled by a strict military dictatorship immigrated to the United States and became a citizen of this country.

The man decided to celebrate his new citizenship by doing some sightseeing around the city where he was living. He was enjoying himself so much that he didn't notice that sundown was approaching. But as soon as the sunlight faded and darkness began to descend, the new American panicked.

He ran up to a car and begged the driver to take him home as quickly as possible. The driver was taken aback and tried to calm the man down. When asked why he had to get home so quickly, the man cried out, "Because I don't want to violate curfew and be arrested."

The problem was that in the man's previous country, the military had imposed a strict curfew. Everyone had to be off the streets by sundown or risk arrest.

The man in the car smiled when he realized the problem. He calmly explained that since the United States has no curfew, the man wasn't in any trouble. The new citizen simply had not yet learned to cast off the bondage of the old country. He was free, but he wasn't living like it.

A lot of Christians, citizens of heaven who have been set free by the grace of God in Christ, have not learned

WHEN YOU GOT
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how to cast off the bondage of their birth in Adam. They sing and talk about freedom, but they are living under an oppressive system of religious rules that sends them running home at sundown, so to speak.

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 booklet, 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.*

Now 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.

THE BONDAGE OF LEGALISM

The apostle Paul gives us a definition of legalism in Galatians 3:3, stated in the form of a question. "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected 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.

This is such a serious matter that Paul used the strongest language possible in addressing the Galatians, who had fallen victim to legalism. He began his letter by saying, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6). Even though Paul called legalism a "gospel," he was using the word to shock his

readers. He quickly added that it was not really another gospel but a distortion of the true message (v. 7).

You see, 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 (Galatians 2:4; see also 5:10). This is why Paul used such strong language. "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" (3:1). The answer was the Judaizers.

A FEW GOOD QUESTIONS

Then Paul asked another series of questions in Galatians 3:2–5, all of which contrast grace with works. The correct answer in each case is that the Christian life, symbolized by the giving of the Holy Spirit, is of grace and not of works.

GRACE-BASED
CHRISTIANS OBEY
BECAUSE IT'S
THEIR DELIGHT.

Allow me to ask you a few questions. Were you saved by keeping the Ten Commandments? Are you going to heaven because you're better than your neighbor? Are you hoping to please God by trying your very hardest to be good?

I hope your answer to each of these is no, because no one will ever be saved or please God by these means.

When you try to mix human effort with God's grace, you're trying to mix oil and water.

Now, don't misunderstand me. Legalism is not merely the *presence* of the Law. God's Law is "holy and righteous and good" (Romans 7:12). The problem is that the Law provides no power to obey it.

Legalism is not the presence of rules but the 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.

A GUILT-DRIVEN SYSTEM

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.

Here's how it works. A Christian who tends toward legalism goes to church one Sunday and hears the preacher say, "You need to read your Bible and pray." 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 a preacher telling his people they ought to read their Bibles and pray? No, and I'll be the first one to say it. 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.

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 (see Matthew 11:30). 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.

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?

In many cases, the answer is that believers are confused about this fundamental truth: "Sin shall not be

master over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14).

A lot of Christians would say, "Come on, Tony, 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.

In Romans 7:1–4, Paul used the death of a spouse to illustrate our freedom from the Law. A woman whose husband has died is free to remarry. The Law was our old "husband," but that relationship is dead, and we are in a new union with Christ. "Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead" (v. 4). A Christian who is trying to please God by legalism while joined to Christ in grace is living an absurdity.

It's like the woman who went on a trip to Europe after her husband died and she had gone through a period of grieving. On the trip she met a wonderful man. They fell in love, got married, and came back to the United States to live in her house.

But when the happy newlyweds arrived home, the man's jaw dropped. Propped up on the living room sofa was the corpse of the woman's first husband. She quickly explained, "I love you, but you must understand; I lived with this man for so long that I can't really function without him. I need to keep him nearby."

The woman's new husband let her know in no uncertain terms that he wasn't about to live with a dead man in the house. She would have to choose between her deceased husband and her new love.

I told you this was an absurdity! But this is what we do spiritually when we try to live by the Law after Christ has forgiven and received us by grace. Let's bury that corpse and move on, because mixing law and grace will never work.

If many believers are confused about the true relationship between law and grace, some 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? Paul gave its purpose in Galatians 3:24. "The Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may 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.

In other words, the Law doesn't exist to make us better but to show us how helpless we are so that we will run to Christ. The Law is the speed-limit sign on the highway. It can't force you to slow down, but it gives the police officer the authority to write you a ticket when you fail to meet the standard.

The Law also arouses sin (see Romans 7:8). 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.

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. Paul explained in Galatians 5:

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. (vv. 1–4)

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 “severed from Christ” and “fallen from grace”? These are two ways of saying the same thing. Legalism cuts us off from the flow of God’s grace.

IT IS LOVE
THAT SUSTAINS
A GODLY LIFE.

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.

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 that sustains a godly life (see John 14:15; 1 John 5:3).

When God saved you, He wrote His Law in your heart and mind (Hebrews 10:16). 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.

Paul explained in 2 Corinthians 3:7–13 that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the old covenant, or the Law, his face glowed with God's glory. But the glory faded, so Moses had to hide his face behind a veil.

But the new covenant of God's grace isn't like that. The Bible says, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:17–18).

In the new covenant, Christ comes to live within us and brings His unfading glory. If we will keep our eyes on Christ, His glory will rub off on us and produce glory within us.