

by Ron Benson

I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who in his love and mercy called you to share the eternal life he gives through Christ. You are already following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all (Galatians 1:6-7, NLT).

Fries with gravy may not sound good to you. But grace is something we all need, all desire and inwardly crave. When we get it, however, it may seem like too much of a good thing. We can look over our shoulder and fear that it's not working. We can fall back into old patterns and habits that come from the "old country" of human effort and works.

How do we know when we've crossed the border into legalism and works-based religion? When does obedience become legalism? When does the Good News become "Not-Good-News-at-all?" How can we live consistently on the grace side of that line?

Here are three biblical benchmarks that can help us know when we've crossed the line.

1. When I obey out of fear, I've crossed the line.

Marjorie had just read an article in a Christian magazine about watching movies. The author wrote that God was not pleased with people who wasted their time with cinema and that he would punish those who willfully viewed propaganda from Hollywood.

Marjorie pondered the idea and decided to take action before the rest of the family came home that evening. She pulled the cable T.V. console from the home entertainment center and threw it in the trash can just as the refuse truck pulled up to haul it away.

Fear is not necessarily a bad thing. Fear keeps us out of trouble and warns us when we are close to danger. But if I live my life with fear as the chief motivating factor for obedience, I'll never leave my house! Paul describes this in Galatians using the metaphor of slavery.

Law-living keeps us enslaved, with fear as a motivator. Our master is the Law, and punishment is the consequence of breaking the Law. But Christ sets us free from that way of living. We are no longer slaves, but children of God, and we can call him "Daddy" (Galatians 4:6).

You may ask, "Doesn't grace encourage sin?" Not when we understand the nature of grace. Grace is the ultimate expression of God's love, and when we begin to experience that love we are not motivated to sin but to live in obedience to the One who loves us. John writes:

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love (1 John 4:18).

Marjorie may indeed have a problem watching inappropriate movies, but she crossed the line back



The life of grace is like a foreign country. It takes time and practice to pick up the culture of the Kingdom. They do things differently here.

Canada is only one hour's drive from my home. If I drive to Canada and order French fries, they will ask if I want them with gravy. This is amazing to me. French fries are great; but French fries served with gravy is just too much of a good thing.

In Canada you can get fries with gravy *and* cheese sauce. It is called *poutine*, it is good and nobody there looks at you strangely if you order it and eat it, even if you are looking over your shoulder in fear that you will be arrested for doing so. Don't ask me how I know. Once you've tasted this Canadian treat, you may wonder why you'd ever want to live anywhere else.

We have been saved by grace and welcomed into a new territory. But we have been estranged so long from grace-living that we often cross over the line from one country to the other: From "grace-land" back to "law-land" where we used to live. This is what was happening to the church in Galatia when Paul wrote to them:

into “law-land” when she pulled the plug in fear of God’s punishment.

2. When I attempt to pay for sin on my own, I’ve crossed the line.

John knew when he typed the key word into the Internet search engine that he was looking for trouble—and he found it. It had been a while since he’d fallen into this trap. Now he was there again, and he felt guilt about his sin.

So John pulled out the Bible he kept in his desk. He made a note in the inside cover, dated it and said a quick prayer. He put his Bible back and felt much better the rest of the day. The note he wrote in his Bible said, “I will spend 30 minutes each day reading God’s word for the next year.”

John felt better that day because he had paid for his sin out of his own spiritual bank account. In effect, he took a loan out against that account, promising to pay off his sin debt by reading scripture. But John’s self-satisfaction did not last, and soon he fell right back into the same ditch. John crossed the line.

How much work would it take you to pay for your sin? Do you have that kind of reserve in your spiritual bank account? You know you don’t. That’s why you came to Christ, isn’t it? You understood that the only way you could pay for sin was death. And the only way to live was in Christ. Now that you’ve entered this new territory and come under the economy of grace, it is sheer madness to attempt to revert to the other way of life.

But you do it anyway. So do I.

Have you ever filled your shopping cart with food only to find out at the checkout line that you left your wallet at home? Grace is like God coming up to you and saying, “It’s okay. I know you don’t have the ability to pay. Let me take care of that for you.” Faith is trusting him to do that. Crossing the line into legalism is going back later and trying to pay for it yourself.

It’s already been paid. You don’t need to pay for it again. To even try is faithlessness.

What about careless John? Reading the word of God is a good thing. Reading it as a payment for sin is not. John felt sorrow for his sin, and godly sorrow leads to repentance. When we confess our sin, God forgives us because Jesus already paid the debt. John should read his Bible because he longs to know more about the One who paid that bill.

3. When I give in order to get, I’ve crossed the line.

Betty heard the preacher say that God would multiply the money she gave ten-fold, and he quoted Scripture to prove it. Betty was behind on her utility bills, and she needed some money for the kids’ orthodonture. She decided that she’d cast her bread upon the waters.

Her need added up to around \$250.00, so she sent the preacher a check for \$25 and waited to get the return on her investment.

I’m treading on dangerous ground here, because I know the folks at Plain Truth Ministries would love to hear from you with a generous donation. But I also know that they would gladly send your money back if it came with the presumptuous expectation of God rewarding you for your donation with big wads of cash.

People, called *Judaizers*, were running around in Paul’s day, attempting to convince new Gentile Christians that they could get a better deal from God if they’d get circumcised. The shocker is that, in spite of the obvious pain involved, many of the Gentiles were buying the idea! After all, who doesn’t want God’s best?

The concept here is one of management. If I give to get, whether the giving is in legal tender or in good works, then I have placed myself in the position of

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CEO over my life. I’m in control, and I’m calling the shots, bartering and gambling on grace. But grace doesn’t work that way. Grace calls on us to give up—give up completely. Paul says:

For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:19-20).

Betty crossed the line when she gave in order to get. We cross the line when we barter with the Almighty to gain advantage.

So where do you choose to live? Paul had rough words for the believers who were crossing the line:

Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (Galatians 3:3-5).

You’ve stepped on the shores of “grace-land” only by the work of Jesus. You don’t want to go back to doing it all yourself. Stay on this side of the border. It’s better than fries with gravy! ☐

Ron Benson has crossed the line way-too-many times, but by God’s grace gets back where he belongs. Ron is encouraged by feedback of any kind, so feel free to let him know what you are thinking at <http://www.ronbenson.net>.