



BY
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Hope for the Terminally Judgmental

His marriage was coming unglued. Michael knew it. He felt the disconnection. He felt the sting of personal failure. It wasn't comfortable for a man whose life had always followed a predictable script. He had been a Christian since he understood what it meant to follow Christ as a young boy. Michael knew there would be fallout within the church and within his family. He felt shame. He felt disappointment from his siblings and Christian colleagues.

Michael's dilemma is all too familiar—even within the Christian community. Some men and women leave a marriage for what they believe will be greener pastures. It happens. It's not right, but it occurs far more often than we care to admit. Usually, it backfires and regret ensues. This was not what happened to Michael.

After working with three counselors, his pastor and attending a 60-hour seminar, his marriage remained lifeless. He knew that change could only happen when both parties are equally committed to a solution. He was at the end of his rope. Michael cried out to God for help. He hoped, he prayed, he worked, and he did everything he

knew to do. The marriage didn't make it. As painful as that was, it was only the beginning.

Michael received a phone call from his pastor during one of his darkest, loneliest days. He arrived at Pastor John's office only to encounter a 45-minute torrent of ridicule. It was a devastating blow to a man who was already struggling to hold it together. When he left, Michael turned to the pastor and said, "Our church motto is 'a place where no one stands alone.' Today, I came to your office to find help but now I feel more alone than ever." The next blow was worse. Michael never saw it coming.

For seven years he had worked to help a struggling ministry get back on its feet. He supported it financially, encouraged the staff and volunteered time. Now, he was on the phone with the chairman of the board. "I'm sorry, Michael, we

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can't use you any more because of your divorce."

At about the same time, he learned that a multi-million dollar Christian-run company he had done work for suddenly dropped him in the middle of his contract because they learned of the divorce. "It has nothing to do with your work for us," they assured him. "The owners just aren't comfortable with your divorce."

As painful as it was, Michael understood the kind of rejection his pastor, ministry colleagues and siblings were meting out. It made perfect sense to him. It made sense because he had felt the same toward others in the past. Until we need mercy extended to us, it is easy not to extend it to others. Suddenly, for the first time in his life, Michael knew what it felt like to be on the other side.

Legalism takes many shapes, but the worst comes in the form of rejection. We reject others because it makes us feel better about ourselves. It serves to deflect the attention from our own sins and on to someone else's.

Jesus never accentuated individual sinful actions without extending hope. Hope is the one thing Chris-

How to Recognize the Legalist in Yourself:

tians can give to each other when we fail, and we will fail. As Gregory Boyd explains in *Repenting of Religion*, “Religious sin is the most destructive kind of sickness, for it masquerades as and feeds off the illusion of health.” He adds, “When religious sin infects people they feed off their judgment rather than love.”¹

We gravitate toward mercy like a moth toward light. We move toward, not away from, those who extend God’s grace when we need it most. On the other hand, we move away from criticism, judgment and self-righteousness. Why? These offer us nothing to salve the pain of our brokenness. James tells us “Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13). This doesn’t mean we ignore immorality. It means we extend Christ’s love when people like Michael are in pain. To do anything less is to become like the religious men who walked past the man who was attacked by robbers on the road to Jericho.

We learn four things from Jesus’ story of the Samaritan who helped the hurting man: (1) he came to where the man was; (2) he took pity on him; (3) he bandaged his wounds and (4) he put the man on his own donkey. It is never easy to show mercy from a distance. We must be where hurting people are. As the story illustrates, showing mercy requires action, a change of heart, and personal sacrifice.²

Shakespeare said, “All the world is a stage, and we are actors...each man in his time plays many parts.” I was one of those actors—as a Christian. It was a heavy burden to carry. It was unnecessary. I lived a life of the obsessive-compulsive, grit-my-teeth kind of Christianity. Sure, I read my Bible (still do), went to church, prayed, taught Sunday school, you know, all the stuff that says you are a good Christian. In my own way, I was.

One day a friend invited me to an Alcoholic’s Anonymous meeting after church. I thought, “I’m so glad my problems aren’t like these losers.” I secretly thought that if they had enough of whatever I had

they should be able to pull themselves out of their mess. In a microsecond, I judged and convicted them and felt my veneer of perfection thicken into a syrupy mess. Then God did something that only he can do. He began to pry open my heart. It wasn’t a pretty sight. I saw my self-righteousness. It was ugly. Then, each of the thirty members of the group went around the circle introducing themselves, “Hi, I’m Joe and I’m an alcoholic.” They were honest. I thought, “I’m Don and I’m a sinner.”

I need God’s grace just as much, maybe more, than they do. Then it hit me. For more than four decades of following Christ, I had done all the right things for all the wrong reasons. That’s what legalism does; it makes us feel we have to earn the right to God’s love, God’s presence, God’s mercy. We don’t.

Jesus made a fascinating statement about the religious leaders of his day. He said, “So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (Matthew 23:3). It’s not that what they were saying was wrong. It’s that there was a disconnection between their beliefs and their behavior. What we believe becomes visible through our actions.

There is an antidote to religious perfectionism. It is to remind ourselves that everything we do springs from one virtue: Love. “It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Corinthians 13:7). □

1. Gregory Boyd, *Repenting of Religion: Turning from Judgment to the Love of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), pp. 203-204
2. Luke 10:33-34, 1 Corinthians 13:7

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1 Are you quick to judge and slow to show mercy?

2 Are you quick to take sides when you hear of the flaws and failings of others?

3 Are you willing to sacrifice to help someone in need?

4 Are you quick to quote a verse from the Bible rather than extend compassion?

5 Do you take satisfaction in knowing your spiritual life is neat and tidy?

6 Do you make choices mainly because you want to please God or primarily because you know people will be disappointed in you?

7 Do you feel your image will be tarnished if you do *the wrong thing*?

8 Does shame or guilt dictate what you do or do not do?

9 Do you feel that you are better than friends and acquaintances who have mucked up their lives?

10 Do you believe certain sins are forgivable while others are not?