

LAW OR GRACE—

BY STEVE MCVEY

Barking up the wrong Tree?

Some Christians find it scary to think that they are totally free from a system of rules. When I first began to understand grace for the Christian, I was afraid that I might become derelict in my responsibilities as a believer. I even thought that without rules, I might begin to minimize the seriousness of sin in my own life.

I came to discover that I had found a security in my religious rules. When I kept them, I felt everything was all right with me spiritually. When I sensed any sort of spiritual deficit in my life, I would mentally run down the checklist of rules to see which one I was failing. But when a person examines himself to see if he is living up to the law, he will always discover areas of inconsistency. I thought the answer was to renew my efforts to do more. Yet even when I poured my energies into keeping these self-imposed laws, I wasn't really experiencing the life God intends.

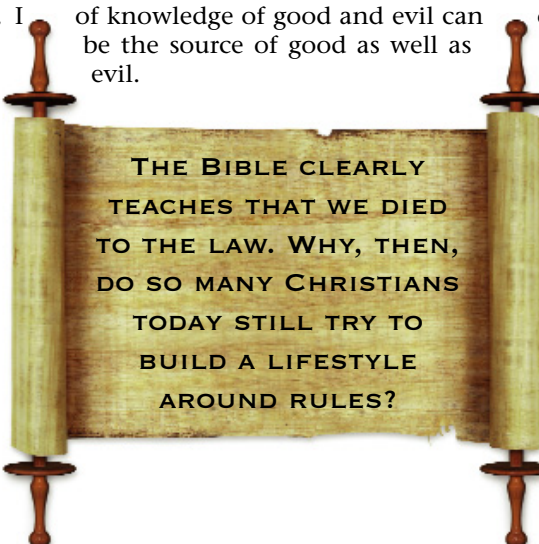
The apostle Paul walked the same legalistic road as many of us. He mentioned how he had believed that he could experience life to the fullest if he only did the right things. Yet he said that when he embraced any commandment to find life, it "proved to result in death for me" (Romans 7:10, NASB). There is no list of rules one may follow and experience life. A Christian may believe his frustration comes because he doesn't adequately live up to certain rules, but the real problem is that he is focusing on rules.

We must recognize that the tree of knowledge of good and evil can be the source of good as well as evil.

Galatians 3 says, "...if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on the law. But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe" (Galatians 3:21-22, NASB). It is important to remember that living by law doesn't necessarily mean that you focus on the law found in Scripture. Like the Pharisees, many people have gone beyond the Bible and created their own laws. A lifestyle ruled by law is one where the focus is on performance. It is a lifestyle which is obsessed with doing the right thing instead of being obsessed with Jesus.

Stay Off the Law Tree

When God placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, he specifically told them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. His plan was that they would ultimately live from the tree of life, which rep-



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resents Jesus Christ—who *is* life. Yet man chose to disobey and eat from the forbidden tree. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil could be called “the law tree” because it offered knowledge about the rules of right and wrong. *When Adam ate from that tree, he instantly found himself at a place where doing right and avoiding wrong became the defining issue of life.* Until that point, his behavior had always glorified God because he had walked with the Lord daily, depending entirely on him for every detail in life. Now his focus was on his behavior, not God.

Jesus came to rectify the damage caused by Adam’s sin. Until the fall, the only thing that mattered was that Adam and Eve were living in total dependence upon God. After their sin, the primary matter became that of doing right. Through the cross, however, we can be restored to the place of intimacy which Adam forfeited. As a result, the criterion for our lives re-

turns to God’s original design: Living in total dependence on him at every moment. The New Testament calls it *abiding* in Christ. When a Christian focuses on doing right and avoiding wrong, he is completely missing the point of the cross as it relates to his lifestyle. He is functioning from the law tree, not life.

Doing Good Can Be a Sin

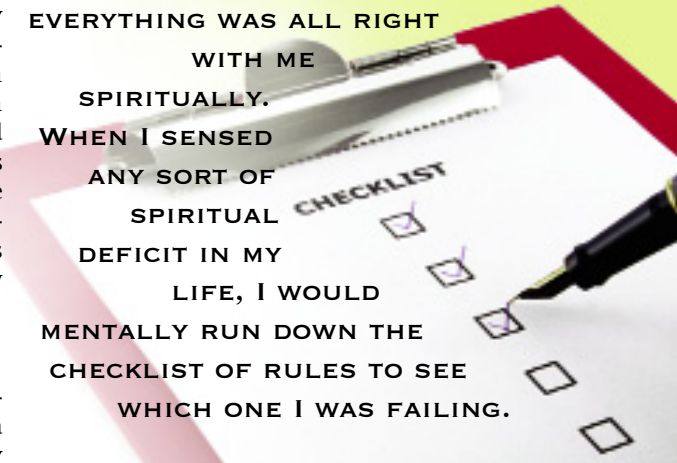
In order to better understand what it means for a person’s life to be ruled by laws, consider this illustration:

Pretend that one morning, after he had eaten from the law tree, Adam woke up because his wife, Eve, was leaning over him and kissing him gently on the cheek. “Good morning, my sweetheart,” she whispered. “I brought you breakfast in bed this morning. You seemed to be resting so well that I let you sleep late today.” Adam opened his eyes, took one look at Eve, and snarled at her in anger, “What do you mean waking me up, woman? Couldn’t you see that I was asleep? How dare you! What have you shoved under my nose...a bowl of fruit? You’ve already caused me enough trouble with fruit! Get out of my face!” Shocked, Eve’s eyes filled with tears and she ran off to a secluded place where she could cry alone.

By mid-morning Adam was feeling guilty about how he had treated his wife.

He found her and humbly approached her. “Eve, I am so sorry. It was so wrong for me to behave that way. It was simply *evil!* Please forgive me. I wouldn’t blame you if you left me for another...well, anyway, you get the point.” Eve looked up through teary eyes as Adam continued. “Eve, I’m going to make it up to you, I promise. Tomorrow will be your special day. Listen,

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world! Tomorrow is Eve Day on planet earth,” he shouted. True to his word, the next day Adam treated Eve like a queen. He pampered her all day long. That night when she went to bed, he gently leaned across her, kissed her on the cheek, and said, “Good night, my dear princess. I’m so blessed to have you as my wife.”

“Oh Adam, you’re so good to me,” she cooed.

Now let’s see how much we understand about legalism. There are only two questions on this test. Our answers to these questions will reveal whether we tend to see the Christian life primarily from a standpoint of law or grace. Ready?

1. Was God pleased with Adam on the first day in the story?

2. Was God pleased with Adam on the second day in the story?

The answer to both questions is *no*. God was not pleased on either day. Adam’s behavior was evil on the first day and good on the sec-

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ond day. However, we must recognize that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil can be the source of good *as well as* evil. Although Adam’s behavior changed from one day to the next, he still had

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the same problem. *On both days he was up the wrong tree!*

When law rules a Christian, his focus is on improving his behavior. Yet even if he does manage to improve his behavior, what has he accomplished spiritually? Even an unsaved person can often improve his performance. Jesus didn't give the gift of salvation merely to help us perform better. He came to earth so that we might have an abundant life! (See John 10:10). There are many miserable Christians who have exemplary behavior, but joy doesn't come by doing the right thing. In a lifestyle where grace rules, Jesus is the source of joy.

Even when a person does good, his actions may still be sin. Only those actions which are animated by the life of Jesus within us have real value. When we live in total dependence on Jesus within us, we are walking in faith and will always glorify God. When we focus on improving our behavior, we are not walking in faith. Hebrews 11:6 plainly says, "Without faith it is impossible to please Him." The Bible says that whatever is not of faith is sin. So a person may do something good and his action could still be a sin because it isn't done in faith. Someone has rightly said that God doesn't appreciate what he doesn't initiate.

Christians Don't Need the Law

Paul clearly asserted that we were made to die to the law so that we might be joined to Christ. What relationship does the Christian have, then, to a system of rules which govern behavior? Absolutely none! When you were saved, you 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" (Romans 7:4, NASB). Having been given the resurrection life of Jesus Christ, you don't need the law anymore. You have Jesus Christ living within to guide your steps.

"Don't we need to commit ourselves to the laws of God?" a person might ask. That's like asking if

Greg Albrecht responds to questions about grace and law.



IS GRACE "IMMORAL"?

SHOULDN'T CHRISTIANS BE MORAL?

10 Percent Grace; 90 Percent Law?

Q. Thank you for your grace-filled preaching. I wanted to ask your views of a group [name deleted] that preaches 10 percent grace and 90 percent law, according to its leader. The group has a clock counter on its website to show how fast people are getting to hell. This group believes that one of the methods of saving people is to expose their sins, and by embarrassment cause them to start obeying God.

A. The ministry to which you have reference joins many other churches and pastors who believe that the Ten Commandments (and at times other portions of the old covenant) must be preached to sinners to prepare them to accept Christ.

While such an approach seems to have some biblical merit, what it amounts to, in many cases, is that condemnation and shame are

demning the hell out of everyone else! We don't find Jesus "exposing" those who did not pretend to be religious.

Nothing in the New Testament gives instructions to Christ's followers to inflict this kind of devious, manipulative preaching on others, in the name of God. The New Testament tells us that people are brought to Jesus for their salvation. It does not indicate that people are saved by shaming them through condemnation.

The group to which you have reference says it preaches 10 percent grace and 90 percent law. If even one-percent law is preached, then the grace of our Lord and Savior is not preached. One-percent required-for-salvation law-keeping so dilutes, waters down and poisons the gospel that it is no gospel at all.

That's the absolutely clear message of the book of Galatians. Once we are in Christ, because of God's grace, we are changed from the inside out. When the risen Lord lives his life in us he transforms us into his "workmanship" (Ephesians 2:10) so that we are obedient to Jesus Christ. We are obedient because he lives in us.

When we obey laws, externally, that obedience does not bring about internal transformation. *Jesus is not produced by morality. Morality does not produce Jesus.* Nor, on the other hand, does Jesus do something because it is the right thing to do. What Jesus does is, by definition, the right thing to do. Christ-centered morality is divinely produced out of the inner beings of those in whom Jesus lives, for,



preached. The basic concept—send them on a guilt trip—then rescue them. Or, as you say this group actually states, expose people's sins, so that in their embarrassment they will accept Christ!?

Does that sound like Jesus? Where do we find Jesus doing such a thing? The only people or system that he exposed were the very ones who were running around exposing and con-

as he promised, living waters will flow out of us (John 7:38).

The approach of Puritanism, and those in the holiness movement at large (which is still alive and well) was that a man is made holy on the basis of humanly produced deeds. Holiness is found, in this view, through our external obedience to God's laws.

This approach leads to a deification, or at least semi-deification, of the Ten Commandments of the old covenant—with plaques, monuments, embroidery, tapestry, extolling the law—but not the Savior. Many people who call themselves Christians would never dream of displaying a cross in their home, but will instead festoon their living environment with Ten Commandment posters and plaques.

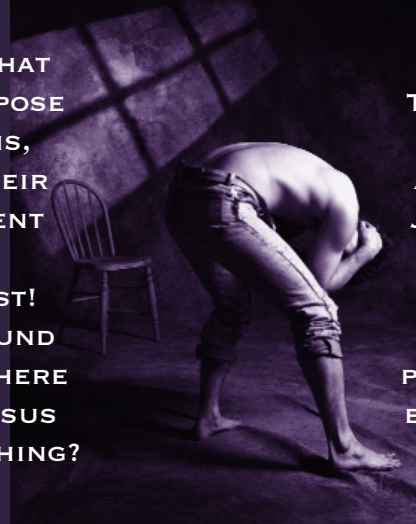
The law fails to bring righteousness and holiness. Righteousness and holiness can only be imputed, by grace; righteousness is imputed and produced by the indwelling of our Lord and Savior. No human or group of humans, no law or combination of laws, can produce holiness.

There is a sense in which the law prepares the way for the gospel—and that sense is this: The law demonstrates the complete bankruptcy and inability of humans to make God love them more because of their obedience. The law leads to Christ in the sense that the cross obliterates the law as a system of worshipping God. For Christians, Jesus is the very center and foundation, he is in the spotlight of our worship—and he does not share that spotlight with any ethical system, whether it be the old covenant, or some other.

We become in Christ—because of who and what he is and what he works in and through us—all that he wants us to be. This “10 percent grace and 90 percent law” approach, about which you ask, is yet another legalistic system of religion—at the

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very best it is getting the cart of law-keeping and moralism ahead of Jesus. It is religion, not relationship.

A Balance Between Law and Grace?

Q. Could you expound on the value of the Old Testament law? I feel like there must be a balance in our attitude toward it, not of course to procure or complete salvation but David and other Old Testament patriarchs seemed to have a perspective that I would like to have.

A. What kind of “balance” about the Old Testament law do you propose? When reading any passage in the Bible, Christians always “balance” their understanding of that passage with a Christ-centered perspective.

All that we know of God, as Christians, all that we experience, is based in Christ. Anything that happened before the cross of Christ must be read in a Christ-centered perspective.

Old Testament individuals and the values they espoused were before the cross. There is much prophetic material in the Old Testament that is Messianic (pointing toward Messiah) which pointed them *forward* to the cross of Christ. For those of us who live after the cross—in our case almost 2,000 years after—our reading of Scripture must always take us *back* to the cross of Christ. It is critically important to maintain a Christ-centered perspective as we read and understand any portion of the Bible.

What did David mean about the law? He meant what all those living during the old covenant un-

derstood—that the law was the foundation of their relationship with God. What does the cross of Christ, and his victorious resurrection teach Christians? That Jesus is the basis of our relationship with God, and that he gave us new commandments—commandments which he will live in our lives if we accept him.

What good is the law of the old covenant? Does it save us? No, Jesus saves us. Jesus alone, without any help from the law—the law of the old covenant, of the new covenant—any law.

What good is the law? The law leads us to Christ. The law shows us that we are dead meat without Christ. The law (any law) shows us that we are imperfect, that we are unable to be good enough for God on the basis of our own internal character and ability to perform. The law thus leads us to the place that we yield to Jesus, who does for us what we can never do for ourselves.

Is the law of the old covenant a “balance” in the life of a Christian? No, authentic Christianity is based on faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone. The law of the old covenant—all of it—is irrelevant for Christians. We live by faith in Jesus, who died and gave himself for us, that we might be in him, because of the blood of the new covenant. The New Testament tells us the life that Jesus will produce in us as we yield to him will be a moral life, but it will not be produced because of our human, intrinsic morals.

Christianity is all about Jesus—whereas religion, including any counterfeit of authentic Christianity, is all about the individual and how hard he/she works to please God. □

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we should commit ourselves to someone other than our own mate. We have died to the rules system. The law still exists, but it isn't intended for those of us who have received the righteous nature of Jesus Christ.

Paul said in 1 Timothy 1:8-10 (NASB):

"We know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that *law is not made for a righteous man*, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the un-

godly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching..." (emphasis added).

Christians are righteous people who have the nature of Jesus Christ. To accept what Paul says about the law in this verse demands that we acknowledge that we have no relationship to rules. Our lifestyle isn't governed by rules, but relationship. We aren't motivated by laws, but love!

My wife, Melanie, and I have four children. In the places where we have lived while rearing them, there are laws governing the responsibilities of parents. These laws are a part of the penal code to ensure that children receive proper care. If parents break these laws, there is the risk that their children will be taken out of their home. In fact, if a violation of the law is severe enough, the parents might even go to jail.

I must confess that during all our years of child rearing, we have never been to the courthouse to read those laws on the books. There are probably hundreds of laws concerning parental responsibilities recorded there, but we've never read even one. One might wonder if we weren't afraid that we might break the law and have our children taken away from us. Yet that thought never crossed our minds once. Al-

though I have never read those laws, I can confidently assert that we have fulfilled every one of them. In fact, we have gone above and beyond what the law requires.

Do you know why? It's because we have related to our children on the basis of love! Love for Andrew, Amy, David and Amber caused us to care for them in a way that far surpasses the minimum requirements of the law. Those laws are indeed on the books and they serve a useful purpose, but they have nothing to do with me. The only people that come to interact with those laws are the people who neglect or abuse their children. Melanie and I don't need them—we love our children.

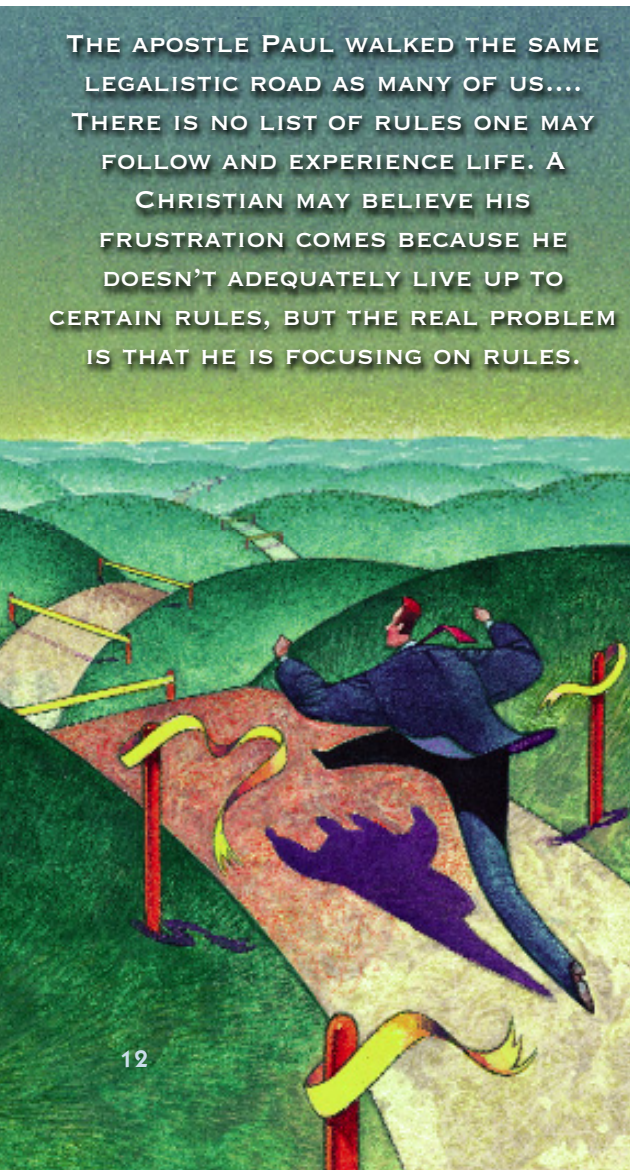
When grace rules a person's life, he will find that his actions will be motivated by love for Jesus Christ. The driving force of his life won't be duty, but desire. He will crawl out from under the heavy weight of *ought to* and start living from a *want to* motivation. He won't have a reckless disregard for religious laws. He simply won't have *any* regard for religious laws.

Now, that kind of statement might startle some people. "Antinomianism!" some theologian might cry. (For the rest of us, the word simply describes one who is against law.) I don't advocate being against the laws of God, but merely want to point out that the law was not given for those of us who are saved. Suffice it to say at this point that the law is not given for righteous people—which includes you if you have received Jesus Christ.

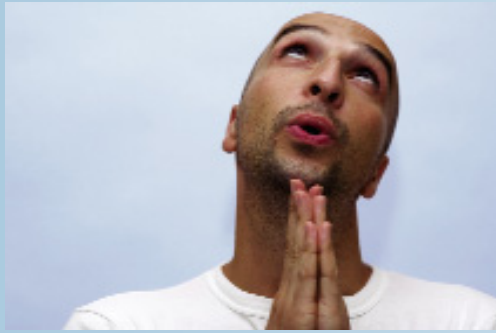
Why Do We Still Live by Rules?

The Bible clearly teaches that we died to the law. Why, then, do so

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SO WHY DO MANY CHRISTIANS LIVE BY LAWS? IN COLOSSIANS 2 PAUL SAYS IT IS BECAUSE “THESE ARE MATTERS WHICH HAVE, TO BE SURE, THE APPEARANCE OF WISDOM IN SELF-MADE RELIGION....” (COLOSSIANS 2:23, NASB).



THE RELIGIONIST LOVES RULES FOR ONE SIMPLE REASON— THEY MAKE HIM LOOK GOOD. IT’S ALL ABOUT APPEARANCE. A LEGALIST ENJOYS THE SPECIAL STATUS HE HOLDS AMONG HIS PEERS BECAUSE HE SEEMS TO KEEP ALL OF THE RIGHT RULES. IT IS A MATTER OF PRIDE.

many Christians today still try to build a lifestyle around rules? Paul deals with this question and bluntly answers it in Colossians 2:

“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 yourself to decrees, 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? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence” (Colossians 2:20-23, NASB).

Here Paul asks a pointed question that presses hard against those embracing legalism. He begins by again emphasizing that believers have *died* to the religious rules system that governs the rest of the world. This is the same point he made in Romans 7:5 when he stat-

ed that we were made to die to the law in the body of Christ so that we might be released from law and joined to him.

Those who believe that a person who emphasizes God’s grace over God’s laws will run wild, have a common misunderstanding about salvation. True Christians don’t want to run wild.

The next question is an obvious one which demands an answer from many in the contemporary church: Why are you acting like you are still a part of the world by submitting yourself to all these regulations? How would you answer that question? Do you understand that when you were saved, God set you free from the rules system so that you could experience Christ as your life? If so, why do you think you still need rules?

As I explained this biblical truth to a fellow named Hank, he argued, “But Steve, you don’t understand! God gave us His law and we must obey it! Without God’s laws, people would run wild!” Hank’s concern reflected a common misunderstanding about salvation. He failed to recognize that Christians don’t *want* to run wild. The presence of Jesus within us changes our desires! John said it like this: “No one who is born of God [habitually] practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot [habitually practice] sin, because he is born of God” (1 John 3:9, NASB).

God’s seed is Jesus. He lives inside the Christian; consequently, it is totally out of character for the saint to sin.

Believers who think they can live a lifestyle of habitual sin will ultimately find themselves suffocating in its stinking stench. It is exciting

to run into the sin house, but a Christian will soon find himself inwardly screaming, “I’ve got to get out of here!”

So why do many Christians live by laws? In Colossians 2 Paul says it is because “these are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion....” (Colossians 2:23, NASB). The religionist loves rules for one simple reason—they make him look good. It’s all about appearance. A legalist enjoys the special status he holds among his peers because he seems to keep all the right rules. It is a matter of pride.

It is interesting to discover that among the various camps of legalism, different sets of rules are held in high esteem. One group is known by the things they do, while another group is known by the things they don’t do. Yet in each clan, those held in highest regard are the ones who are the best at keeping the particular esoteric rules of their group. The sad irony of their diligent focus on behavior is that their rules “are of no value against fleshly indulgence” (Colossians 2:23, NASB).

In other words, a ton of rules won’t provide an ounce of prevention against sin. To the contrary, rules actually impede our spiritual walk in a way that most Christians would never imagine. □

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