"You white crackers are all alike. You think you can come in here and boss us around like we're slaves on your damn plantation! We ought to kick your honky ass... White folk like you don't give a damn about blacks, all you be thinkin' bout is gettin' ahead on the backs of us n******!"

The year was 1975, the height of the Civil Rights Movement and tremendous racial tension in our nation. I was in Basic Training at Lackland Air Force Base and assigned to a flight of newly enlisted men, mostly from the Detroit area, and mostly black.

I was a white boy from a small, secluded Northern Idaho town where blacks weren't a minority, they were nonexistent. Apart from television, I had seen maybe ten black people in my life and they lived in Spokane, WA, 150 miles away. But thanks to my parent's mentoring on race, I can honestly say I didn't have a prejudiced bone in my body. I may have been ignorant and white, but I wasn't racist.

Drill Sergeant Striker (a black man himself) had specifically ordered me to tell everyone on laundry duty that day (which happened to be made up of three black recruits and me) to make sure that we didn't wash "the colored clothes with the whites."

When I passed that message on to my fellow airmen in the laundry room, all hell broke loose. (I didn't even realize the irony of Sgt. Striker's command until weeks later.) In addition to being blamed for everything from slavery to nuclear weapons that day, I really thought I was going to get my "cracker ass" beat.

I tried to describe my hick background but they weren't interested. I tried to remind them that I was born in the year 1957, not 1857 or 1757, and that I had nothing to do with slavery or the subsequent oppression of blacks. But the more I defended myself the worse things got. Finally, out of fear or frustration, or both, I threw up my hands and said "Okay—I'm white, just don't rub it in."

Even in my youth and ignorance, I understood their bitterness toward me. Whites in our nation had mistreated blacks beyond words for generations. Ignorant and shameful white history like that didn't just vanish when we all got randomly tossed together for laundry duty in Basic Training. But, when the power shifted to their clear favor in the laundry room that day, they ended up treating me the same way they despised whites for treating them.

In racism and classism the empowered race/class attempts to diminish or destroy the worth and dignity of the others. Recognition and respect for the individual in such conditions is nonexistent because individuals are absorbed in race/class stereotypes and prejudices.

The good news is that such conditions can be altered. By the time I finished basic training many of those black guys had become my friends and America has since elected a black president.

Racism, Classism and Religious Legalism

Religious legalism tends to create the same type of dehumanizing prejudice and condemnation as racism and classism. If you don't measure up to the empowered hierarchy's subjective measuring stick of worth and acceptance; boy oh boy, will they rub it in!

Christian women have long felt the pain of second class Christian citizenship. In my earlier years of ministry women who dared challenge the glass ceiling of equality with men often found themselves surrounded by authoritarian men quoting verses from Paul about women being silent in the church and obtaining their salvation through childbirth. Numerous denominations have since battled to recognize women as equals to men in God's eyes.

Until recently divorcees were told by countless churches that if...
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they remarried not only were they ineligible for membership and leadership roles, they risked judgment in hell. In the ‘70s and ‘80s, one of my professors in seminary, bestselling author David Seams, was blacklisted by legalistic Christians for performing marriages for divorced men and women. It mattered not that these couples had gone through pre-marital counseling with him. Interracial couples endured much harsher walls of church resistance and prejudice.

Often those who have had ethical and moral failings are given a social death sentence from Christian legalists. Forgiveness and retribution, which are trumpeted as loving hallmarks of Christianity, are muted or completely muzzled.

I have a pastor friend who was arrested in a highly publicized prostitution sting operation. He is a person of amazing talent, who has had tremendous success in ministry, but he lacked humility and compassion—which I suspect, led to this screw-up. However, what’s more humbling than a public moral failure? As he works toward reconciliation with his wife and family, I believe he will emerge as an infinitely better husband, father and friend. But in all likelihood he will never be a better pastor because he will never get the opportunity. “He will never pastor again,” is the statement most used by the church regarding him. He has been left as road-kill by the church and I don’t know which is worse—his moral failure or that of the church?

From Rubbing It In to Loving It Up

Smokers, pop-stars, doctrinal dissenters, homosexuals, pro-choice advocates, the mentally challenged, evolutionists, skeptics, atheists…even Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny all have experienced legalistic Christians rubbing it in. Folks tell me over and over again that their clear preference is to simply avoid such Christianity entirely rather than be subjected to its rejection and spurn. They say it is easier to have a relationship with God apart from the church.

But, do you notice there is a distinct past tense nature to much of the accounting I have given above? Change is a comin’. I believe we’re seeing early hints of the sun setting on legalistic Christianity in America…at least as an influential, driving force in our culture. Many churches, publications (like Plain Truth), mission organizations and indeed Christians themselves are shifting away from law to love, from religion to relationships, from rubbing it in to loving it up.

Stunning examples of this shift away from legalism are the many, many pastors refusing to any longer cooperate with the corruption of the good news of Jesus Christ. Bask in the warmth of this heartfelt excerpt from “An Open Letter to Former Parishioners” written by a former pastor, denominational leader and missionary of more than 35 years:

“I am so very sorry. I hear the pain in your hearts when you tearfully admit you have a hard time believing God could love you. I now realize I bear a good bit of the responsibility for it. Some of the things I taught and did when I was your pastor harmed you and were a great disservice to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Early on I simply didn’t know any better. I taught you what I had been taught. I was the product of a form of Christianity that has dominated for so long—an institutionalized, clergy led, power preserving perversion of what Jesus intended for his followers. After all, who was I to question what my instructors said was the correct way to believe and ‘do’ church?

“When life experiences and personal Bible study exposed cracks in my rigid doctrinal foundation, I began to suspect there was more to knowing God than I knew. Still, I deviated little from the denominational tradition in which I was trained and continued to teach things of which I was no longer convinced. It was too important for me to preserve my good standing and keep my denominational star on the rise.

“As a result, our church environment was a chronic breeding ground for hypocrisy. We played comparison games and excluded ourselves from anyone who sinned differently than we did. We were hard on each other whenever one of us failed. We thought it was our duty to keep each other in line and maintain impossible standards of ‘holiness.’ We occupied ourselves with debates about whether Christians should dance, go to movies, use alcohol, sleep in on Sunday and miss going to church, wear certain types of clothes or listen to certain types of music. We quarreled over Bible translations, hymnals, sound system volume and carpet colors. Conformity to group standards was a very high value, as was compliance to membership policies and the pastor’s authority. In the name of maintaining order I rebuked and ‘disciplined’ those who did not comply.

“Not until I was off the church payroll was I willing to declare in no uncertain terms, ‘that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, THE Plain Truth
not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation’ (2 Corinthians 5:19). Our mission is to go lovingly into the world around us with liberating good news rather than with preachy judgment pressuring people to withdraw with us into our own little subculture.

“My constant prayer for you today is that our merciful Heavenly Father will undo the damage I caused in your spiritual development. I pray that God will make himself known to you as the essence of love that he is.”

I long ago lost count of the number of pastors like my friend above who are no longer pastors, and I will hear from many more as soon as this article is published. They are but a fraction of the total number of people who have decided they will no longer participate in legalistic Christianity.

My end-of-time Christian friends tell me this exodus is an apocalyptic sign that the return of Jesus is nearly upon us. They say that any moment now Jesus will show up and take the remaining loyal followers of their belief system out of the earth and leave the rest of us to try to come to our senses under the free reign of Satan.

I see this exodus as people simply getting tired of having their noses rubbed across the ten-grain sandpaper of religious rules and judgments. I see Christianity starting to be redeemed from those who have been steadily dragging it down for generations. And it is only my speculation, but I don’t think Jesus is the least bit miffed by this chain of events. I think he is delighted whenever people exchange religious legalism for kindness, patience and mercy.

The Transformation of Legalism?

Before our very eyes, legalistic Christianity is being transformed from a present reality to a page in a history book. It is on its way out, like so many other oppressive agendas in our American history: slavery, the American Indian Wars, child labor sweatshops, suppression of women and racism in the laundry room of Basic Training.

After hearing about my unnerving altercation in the laundry room, a black airman named JJ (who was way ahead of us in maturity and insight) took me aside along with one of the black airmen who was in the laundry room that day and gave us this speech.

“Okay,” JJ prompted us, “let’s all put our hands out beside each other palms down.” We did so with skepticism. “What do you see?”

“Looks like zebra stripes to me brother,” said the black airman.

“To tell you the truth,” I said sheepishly, “I’ve never really looked at black skin real close like this. It’s weird how we can all have such different shades of color.”

The other airman was really dark but JJ’s black skin was actually pretty light. Still, we weren’t impressed, nor did we understand where JJ was going with this.

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“Now, let’s flip our hands over,” JJ instructed. “What do you see?”

“FAR OUT!” we said in unison (remember it was the ’70s). I was totally blown away to see that the inside palms of our hands looked remarkably close to the same color. I was hard pressed to tell whose hand was white and whose was black.

“You see,” JJ continued knowing he had our undivided attention, “where we work (our hands), God made us alike. Don’t let the differences on the outside which don’t really matter take away from the similarities on the inside that mean everything.”

“Now,” JJ concluded, “take your hands and join them together where they are the same.” As we did, I found myself shaking hands with a black man for the first time. “This is how God wants us to be—brothers joined together in peace with one another.” I simply couldn’t stop the tears from flowing down my cheeks and I fight them even now as I write about it decades later. It was one of the most beautiful and holy moments of my life.

Jesus didn’t come to establish a religion that divides, judges, excludes, demeans and degrades fellow humans based on externals.

He came that we may all be one as he and the Father are one—one in heart, mind and spirit. When we are united like this there’s nothing to rub anyone’s nose in and we can get on with walking together in peace and love—hand in hand.

Amy-award winning writer, Glen Moyer, is a pastor and a gifted communicator of the gospel—a storyteller whose insights illuminate the depths of God’s mercy and grace. You can read more of Glen’s work at www.Clothman.com.