



HE LOVES ME —HE LOVES ME NOT

BY GREG ALBRECHT

When I was in grade school I had lots of girlfriends. A few of them, usually in a roundabout way, actually found out how I felt about them! Most of them were “secret loves”—that’s the way it was back in the olden days. My buddies and I liked girls, but as pre-teens in the late 1950’s, we couldn’t quite bring ourselves to tell them. We didn’t want to be rejected (and what human of any age does?).

Do you remember that game we used to play when we were kids? If my buddies and I wanted to know how a certain, special girl felt about us, without risking our ego by telling her personally, we would pick a daisy and begin to pluck its petals. As we plucked each petal we would chant,

“She loves me, she loves me not, she loves me, she loves me not....” This little game was said to have the power to reveal whether the object of our affection felt the same way about us as we did about them. It was a game about relationships. It sounds so silly and infantile now, but we really believed that the last petal on the daisy would give us some insight about the relationship we desired. Of course, if we didn’t get the answer we desired, then we would pick another daisy and start over. **Legalistic religion has a lot in common with daisy-petal plucking.**

Many of us play a similar game with God. We are convinced that we can play games to make God like us, or make him like us more. We believe we can determine whether God loves us at all, or still loves us, on the basis of the daisy petals of our lives:

You lose your job. *He loves me not.* You get a new job that pays more money. *He loves me.* You get sick, have surgery, miss work for several weeks and fall behind in your bills. *He loves me not.* You recover, in fact now you’re the picture of health, without

a care in this world. *He has to love me, I feel great.* You pray and you “get” what you ask for. *He really loves me—he’s giving me what I want.* You pray and don’t get the answer you want. *He loves me not.*

You ARE Accepted—Accept It!

Grace is the basis of the relationship God offers to us. God wants us to accept the fact that we are accepted. He wants us to surrender all ideas that we can somehow make him love us, or make him love us more. We need not resort to picking spiritual daisy petals to determine whether God loves us. He loves us, but he loves us on his terms, not on ours. He loves us with his love, which is not at all like the human love and rejection that we experience.

There are many factors that negatively influence our relationship with God, and legalism has to be one of the most toxic and damaging. The world of religion is permeated with oppressive, legalistic thinking.

Hundreds of millions of people today have a relationship with a church or a religious system that they think is one and the same as their relationship with God, but in many cases their relationship with religion is completely at odds with the relationship God offers.

Legalism is probably the most toxic and debilitating of all **religiously transmitted diseases**. It’s particularly difficult to combat because it offers to fill a need that all humans have. Religious legalism meets the human need for security—it’s a religious response to fear. Legalism is born of fear.

We don’t want God to be mad at us, so religion offers a system of rules,

regulations, restrictions and rituals that, if followed, will (according to false claims of religion) make God happy. We don’t want to experience suffering, so some forms of religious legalism have invented a careful series of events surrounding the so-called Rapture, which promises to save our necks from horrible suffering. But again, this promise comes at a price. We must sell our soul to religious legalism because, as the legalist threat/cliché goes, “Get right or get left [behind]!”

We humans want to be healthy and, truth be told, each one of us would love to have lots more stuff—we would love to “enlarge our boundaries” as one recent best-selling Christian book promised. Of course, we are easy pickings for anyone who tells us about how we can be healthy and wealthy because it’s just what we want to hear. There are health-and-wealth churches, ministries, pastors and preachers who are all too willing to accommodate those who are ready to fall for this **religiously transmitted disease**.

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Humanly manufactured, man-made laws become the means by which Christ-less religion offers humans heavenly security, in the name of God. Legalistic religion uses phrases like “Keep the laws and the laws will keep you,” or, conversely, “Break the laws and they will break you.” **Legalism is the damnable lie that says God’s pleasure in me and love for me is based on my obedience.**

The plain truth is that the relationship God offers to us is not based on what we produce and how well we perform. God offers us a relationship of trust and love, based solely on his grace, if we are willing to accept the new life Christ will live in us.

The idea of actually yielding control of our lives to God and completely surrendering to Jesus is frightening, so instead humans are happy to say the “right” words about yielding to God while selling their souls as slaves to the officious pronouncements of religious authorities. When we are mesmerized and led down the garden path by legalism, we develop a false sense of security, thinking that our compliance with moral standards is one and the same as having a close relationship with God.

Externalism—The Worst Sins and Sinners

Religious legalism leads us into spiritual pride as it isolates us, creating a subculture with its own in-house vocabulary and mannerisms. Those who are in bondage to legalistic religion are encouraged to believe that everyone who doesn’t precisely conform to the rules and restrictions of their particular religious club is doomed. It’s a simple world for slaves of religious legalism—they are “in” (loved by God) and others are “out” (unloved by God).

Oppressive legalism leaves its followers no logical conclusion other than to engage in “confrontational evangelism” because, after all, if we really care about friends and relatives who don’t jump through all of the religious hoops that we do, then we must conclude that they can only be saved from God’s wrath if we scare the hell out of them. In an attempt to voluntarily enslave them in our specific religious prison, we are encouraged to confront them—not to engage them with a relationship of love, but condemn them with threats and fear. The more oppressive and legalistic the church is, the more hell-fire and brimstone

condemnations will issue from pulpits, effectively trying to scare people into buying “fire insurance” so they won’t be eternally basted on some spit in hell.

It’s not a pretty picture, is it? But it is an accurate picture of the state of churchianity in North America today. **Legalism has turned many churches into miserable little self-righteous, spiritually incestuous clubs of condemnation, where lists are made and modified—lists that condemn outsiders to hell.** Typical lists of really bad things that sinners (people who don’t belong to our church) do include abortion, drug abuse, homosexuality, alcoholism and belief in evolution.

It’s interesting that legalistic religion focuses on certain external behaviors and labels them as the worst of the worst, but at the same time little if any emphasis is given to other external human failings like gluttony, political corruption, corporate greed, pride, arrogance, deceit, gossip, slander, racism, sexism, war-mongering and nationalism (worship of country instead of the one true God).

Legalistic religion often picks and chooses its list of outwardly observ-

able “worst sins” and “worst sinners.” Externalism is spiritually blind, overlooking internal sin, which gives rise to external behavior. Jesus clearly said that those things that come from within condemn us (Mark 7:16).

It is possible to be in step with all the rules and regulations of legalistic religion, while inwardly being filled with lust, hatred, envy, anger and jealousy. God is after our hearts, for authentic, Christian behavior is produced by a transformed heart. If Jesus lives his new life within us then the external product of his risen life will be the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). God’s pleasure in us comes from outside of us—it comes from his pleasure in the obedience and work of Jesus Christ on his Cross. Because of God’s matchless and supreme grace, when we surrender to Jesus—unconditionally, without any reservations, giving up any idea that we can make God happier with us than he would have been on the basis of what we do—then God credits the righteousness of Jesus to our account.

There is no other topic more important for Christians to study and to pray about than God’s grace.

Because of God’s grace we can know God—we can have a special, intimate, wonderful relationship with God. Because of God’s grace we can be free in Christ—released, redeemed and saved from religious oppression. By God’s grace we can love God because he loved us first (1 John 4:17). Grace is the very essence of God, and it is the very foundation of our relationship with him.

Grace is the polar opposite of religious legalism. That’s why it is so critical to accept God’s invitation to be rescued from the counterfeit religion of legalism and oppression and embrace the God of grace.

The Master Heals a Troubled and Oppressed Prince

There’s an old parable about a prince who became convinced, through some mental aberration, that he was a chicken. He took off all his clothing



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and crawled under the royal dining table and lived off scraps and crumbs. The king and queen called in the best doctors in the kingdom, but no one seemed to be able to cure the prince.

One day a man who had heard of the prince's emotional duress arrived at the castle. The uninvited visitor offered his services to the royal family. The king and queen were at the end of their rope, and even though the stranger lacked professional qualifications they decided they had nothing to lose. They welcomed the services of the stranger, a man they later came to know as the master.

The master went into the royal dining room, took off all his clothing, and sat under the table with the prince. The prince looked at him and said, "I am a chicken." The master responded, "Well then, I am a chicken too."

The two sat under the table for some time, eating and sleeping, until one day the master said, "You know, I think I can be a chicken and still wear a shirt. I think you can too."

So they both put their shirts on. A few days later the master said the same thing about wearing trousers, until finally the master coaxed the prince to put on all his clothing, and then, some time after that, to sit and eat at the table. In the end, the prince was cured of his fixation.

This parable has some remarkable similarities with The Master, The Great Physician, coming into our world. He comes to where we are—our own private places of torment and pain. He doesn't come into our world to condemn us (John 3:17) but to save us (John 3:16). When Jesus, the God-man, came into our world to be one of us, he laid aside his regal vestments, making himself nothing (Philippians 2:7) by comparison with the glory of the heavenly kingdom. **Now incarnated as one of us, Jesus crawls under the table with us and just sits there with us.** No sermons, no lectures, no haranguing about how bad and evil and sinful we are. No threats of hell fire. He just sits there with us, as one of us.

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connect from God. There is no doubt that our sin is a root cause—our lust, envy, jealousy, and vanity. But there are many institutions that aid and abet our sinful condition, causing us to become spiritually unstable and even deranged. I believe the big business of religion is culpable for much of the alienation from God in our world today. I believe much of our shame and guilt, that drives us under the table, is caused by religion.

I will always remember one of the scenes in the movie *Forrest Gump*. In spite of Forrest's low score on IQ tests (his IQ was 75) the movie continuously depicts Forrest's simple and sincere wisdom, far beyond intelligence as calculated by society. Forrest is usually judged as completely stupid by those who first meet him, but those who come to know him realize he has discernment beyond many of his peers. You probably recall some of the lines from the script, down-home bromides such as "Stupid is, as stupid does" and "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you are going to get." Forrest is a man who remains child-like in his attitude.

Jenny is the love of Forrest's life, a girl he first meets on the school bus the first day of school. While all the other children on the bus make fun of Forrest and don't want him to sit

next to them, Jenny invites him to sit next to her. It's the beginning of a lifelong love story. It's a love story somewhat like "the Prodigal Son," in that Jenny is a wild child of the 60's, living a wasteful and permissive life. She always has other men who have more to offer than the seemingly dysfunctional Forrest. When she finally comes home—used, abused and worn out—Forrest is there for her.

One day Forrest and Jenny take a walk through the country roads of their childhood. They happen upon an abandoned house. Jenny instantly recognizes the house as the place of her abusive childhood, and, enraged, starts to throw rocks at her former residence. But try as she might she can't demolish the house with her rock throwing—she can't remove the ugly memories of her past that haunt her and to a degree, control her. Her shame and guilt are wrapped up in that old house.

When Jenny collapses into a sobbing, emotional heap on the dirt road Forrest sits down, cross-legged, beside her, trying to comfort her. The narrative voice-over, the voice of Forrest as he remembers the incident in his later life explains, "Sometimes there just aren't enough rocks." Forrest sits there with Jenny as she relives the pain of her past. Forrest continues to be there for Jenny, even when she contracts what we are led to believe is AIDS. After Jenny dies Forrest buys that house and has it bulldozed—a symbolic gesture to wipe away that pain from Jenny's life.

When we *connect with God* we come to know **Jesus, who came to be with us.** We come to know that he is still with us, forever and ever. **He sits next to us, under the table of our compulsions and addictions, or on an old country road where we have collapsed, exhausted from trying to purge and expunge our shame and guilt.** Jesus knows that we have fixations and addictions that overpower us. He knows that we are overwhelmed by sin and evil. At such times he is there for us, next to us, calling us to his rest and his peace. At such times he invites us to unplug from all of our earthly connections, including our religion, and connect with him. As the

Lamb of God, the Chief Shepherd of our souls, he calls to us, inviting us to let him bear our burdens, and live in his house, *by God's grace*.

The Greek Passion

Nikos Kazantzakis wrote a novel called *The Greek Passion*. It's a story based upon the experiences Kazantzakis had early in life. When he was a young boy the Turks came into many small villages on Crete, murdering and butchering Greeks in bloody atrocities. After a massacre in their village, his father took young Nikos out and made him touch the corpses of the dead men. His father did not want him to forget.

In Kazantzakis's novel the word *passion* has two meanings: The Passion of

would leave. Some of the elders of the town demand that the refugees move on, while the shepherd boy, now thinking more like Christ, defends the refugees. The young shepherd boy urges the villagers to reach out and help the refugees.

The conflict comes to a head at Christmas when everyone gathers at the village church to celebrate the birthday of their Lord and Savior. During the worship service the man who was chosen to play Judas stabs the shepherd boy to death. Using irony to teach a profound and Christ-like message, Kazantzakis explains that many of the people of the village are actually relieved that the shepherd boy, whom they had chosen to play Christ, was murdered and no longer around to make them uncomfortable by taking the side of the refugees.

Specific details in *The Greek Passion* are fiction, but the moral is absolutely true to the gospel of Jesus Christ. *The Greek Passion* is a story of the long-standing and ongoing religious war between the primarily Islamic Turks and the Christian Greeks. It's also a story about how those Christians in name only are merely going through the motions—doing all the religious things, showing up at the right place, having the right expression on their faces, saying the right things, standing up at the right time and kneeling at the appropriate moment. They are doing all of the right religious things but they still, ironically, welcome the death of the young shepherd boy because of his Christ-like behaviors and beliefs.

"Set Your Hearts on Things Above"

Christ-less religion has always attempted to eliminate authentic Christianity. Religion has opposed authentic Christians during the course of history. Religion attempts to bypass or improve upon Jesus—to modify and even counterfeit him and offer a false gospel and a bogus salvation in the process. Jesus sets us free from all such encumbrances that weigh us down, allowing us to love, comfort and reach out to everyone—including refugees who have suffered at the hands of religion. Authentic Christianity teaches that God loves the whole world, while oppressive re-

ligion teaches us to love only our own, only those who are part of our group (Matthew 5:43-48).

The Cross of Christ and his empty tomb call us out of the gutter of human passion, lust, greed, envy, competition and vanity. Christ alone can save us from ourselves! He alone can save us from the bitterness, divisiveness, animosity and hatred that so characterize our world. Jesus Christ can even save us from religion!

Jesus calls us to new life—the life of the age to come. Our risen Lord calls us to life in which he lives his life within us, breaking down walls and barriers constructed by our fleshly lusts and vanity.

Authentic Christianity insists that Jesus Christ is the ground zero of our lives. Performance-based religion insists that human effort, performance and works are at center stage, in the spotlight. True Christianity points to the work of Christ as the only source of our salvation, and that he alone, the Light of the world, is worthy to occupy the spotlight.

Religious legalisms shrink our vista of God's world and our understanding of him, the very world that God loves so much that he gave us his Son that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life. Jesus enlarges our vision, helping us to see that the whole world can be part of God's limitless grace, mercy and love.

Jesus alone is our Savior. Jesus alone is the Answer. Our salvation lies with Jesus, not religion. Oppressive religion is sick, toxic and dying. Christ-less religion has no power to impart eternal life. The good news is that authentic Christianity, *Christianity without the Religion*, cannot be silenced or extinguished any more than the religious authorities could keep Jesus in his tomb (Matthew 27:62-66).

Unplug from religion. Lose your religion. Embrace Christ. Connect with God. Let us look to the Lord of our lives, who gives us life eternal, life that no one else can give, life that no one can take from us. Most of all, may we accept the relationship of his love he so freely offers, that we may live in his eternal kingdom, enveloped by his peace and presence. God accepts you—accept his love! Embrace and welcome God's love for you. *Faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone*.

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Christ and the Greek passion for freedom. Kazantzakis marries the two concepts in his novel, painting a rich picture of the freedom Christ gives his people (Galatians 5:1).

The story is centered in a small Greek village where the people dramatically reenact the Easter celebration every year. Those who are chosen to act in the passion play are informed of their parts a year ahead of time so that they have time to get into character.

One year a simple shepherd boy is chosen to play the part of Jesus, with other villagers playing Simon Peter, John, and Judas, among others. In his novel Kazantzakis' characters not only prepare for their parts for almost one year, they gradually become the character they are depicting. The shepherd boy becomes more Christ-like and the man who will play Judas becomes more vindictive and deceitful, until his best friends cannot stand to be around him. Life begins to imitate art.

During the year leading up to Easter and the village passion play, refugees arrive in the village. The refugees have been driven from their homes by Turks and initially the village welcomes them, giving them aid and assistance. But as the weeks and months pass, the people of the village grow tired of being inconvenienced and begin to wish that the refugees