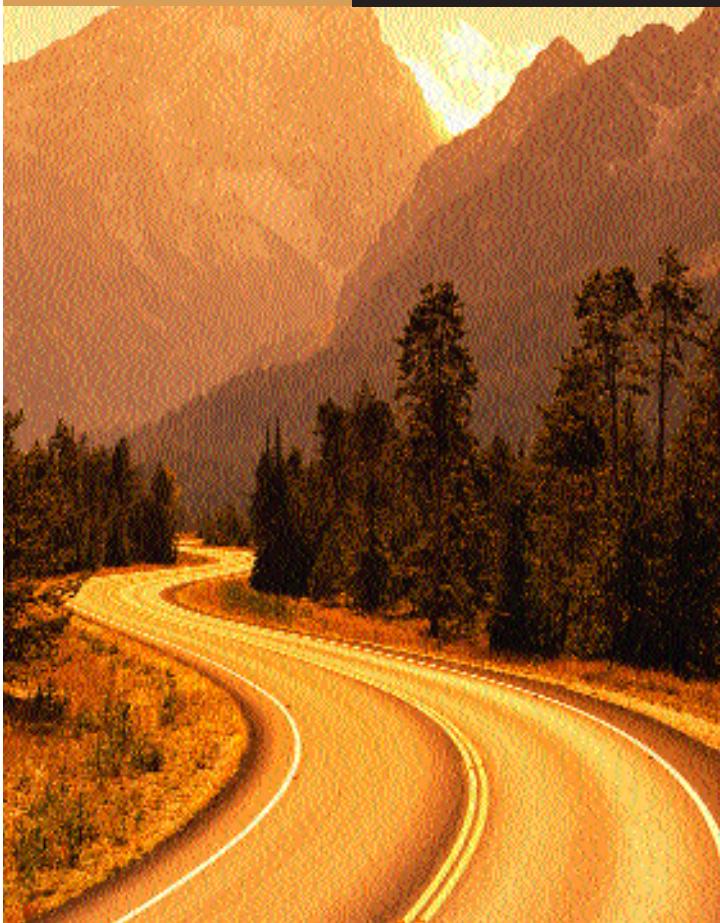


volume 3



JOURNEY  
TO FAITH

Good News!

# Good News— Leaving Legalism Behind

**D**uring the last months of World War II, a Japanese soldier named Shoichi Yokoi became convinced the war against the United States would be lost. He believed that he would be killed if he were to be discovered, so in 1944 he fled to Guam and began living in a cave when the tide of war began to turn against the Japanese. He remained hidden for 28 years! He only came out at night, eating frogs, rats, snails, shrimp, nuts and mangoes. Even when he decided that the war must finally be over, he was afraid to come out for fear he would be executed. Two hunters found him one day and escorted him to freedom.

He was sure the United States would stop at nothing to end his life. He wasted almost three decades in fear and doubt. The Japanese soldier made himself a virtual slave to his mistaken beliefs. Though his story may sound incredible, he is not the only one who has been a slave to a mistaken belief.

The vast majority of people in North America believe in God. Chances are that you are one of them. But not everyone believes the same thing about God. Many, if not most people are unsure, and uncomfortable about their relationship with God. They aren't quite sure where they stand with God from day to day. They're pretty sure they haven't lived up to all of God's expectations, so they feel that they need to do good things and be involved in some kind of reli-

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gious activity to “make up for” this lack. Maybe you have felt the same way.

It's almost as if there is a Dow-Jones-like report in heaven, a huge message board continuously keeping track of how human beings are doing, whether their stock today is up or down.

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we are to believe that we need to obey God's commands in order to please him. After all, the way to stay out of trouble with our fellow human beings is find out what they want and do it. If you don't want to get pulled over by a policeman while driving your car, you need to know the rules of the road and abide by them. When we do this we call ourselves “law abiding citizens.”

That's how many people think of themselves and God. God has laws, laws that we can read about in the Bible and laws that are explained, modified and enlarged by religious leaders, and we believe that it is our duty to abide by these laws and traditions. If we obey, then we believe that God is happy with us. If we blow it, we are convinced that God is angry with us.

Legalism has a number of inherent dangers that can ruin our relationship with God, instead of enhancing it. When Jesus came to earth he spoke to this issue frequently and clearly. Religion, by itself, was not what God was looking for from us. This ran counter to the prevailing religious thinking of Jesus' day.

### **Legalism Creates a False Sense of Security**

Jesus didn't hesitate to speak to those who were quite confident that they were extremely righteous. The worst offenders were probably the Pharisees, a religious group within Israel. They

were teachers of the law, learned men—greatly respected for their piety and devotion. However, many of them were also confident that they were better than everyone else. When Jesus preached that everyone needed to repent and turn to him, the Pharisees were offended—in fact, they were outraged. They felt they had no need to repent, to turn away from their sins, for they believed they had none. Any suggestion that they might be sinners—that they might be in the wrong—was offensive to them.

So one day Jesus directed a parable to the Pharisees. We find it in Luke 18:10-14. Jesus said, “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself; ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’” Then Jesus turned to the crowd and said, “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Although the Pharisee thought of himself as spiritual, upright and moral—better than others—Jesus makes it plain that the Pharisee was laboring under a great deception. One of the great dangers of legalism, attempting to earn your way into God's favor by your deeds, religious activities and good works, is that you will be deceived about your true condition before God.

The Pharisee in this parable is a picture of self-confidence. He enters the Temple to pray. Pharisees loved to be seen at the Temple praying. Being seen in public and acting holy and pious only added to their public image. What was uncommon was for a tax collector to do the same thing. His reputation was far from spiritual. Jewish tax collectors were despised because they were seen as being in league with

the hated Roman Empire. Furthermore, they would often collect more taxes than were required—for their own personal use. It would not be easy for a tax collector to go to such a public place as the Temple where he could be abused and scorned. Only a deep, desperate spiritual need could have driven this tax collector to go to the Temple.

The Pharisee stands proudly, lifting his hands to heaven. But is this a prayer at all? No, it is instead a personal congratulations for a job well done, and an invitation for God to agree with him about his inherent goodness. He confesses no sin, for he honestly does not believe he has any.

It is easy to become a modern Pharisee—all we have to do is play the comparison game. As the Pharisee compared himself to others—robbers, evildoers and adulterers—he came out looking good. When we compare ourselves with other people who are worse than we are in order to feel better about ourselves, we develop a false sense of security about our true condition before God.

Unfortunately, we are operating on a false premise. Think, for just a moment, about what would happen if everyone did that. If everyone decided whether or not they were “good enough” based on comparing themselves to those who are worse than they are, where would that lead?

Each person would, of course, find someone who was a little worse than they were. Eventually this reasoning would allow every person in the world to feel justified for how we act and behave because we would all be better than someone else, except the lowest, most evil person imaginable.

When we compare ourselves to others and not to God, we can always find some way to make ourselves look good. The lie is found in the idea that God compares our goodness to other humans. He doesn’t. He compares our goodness against his perfect standard. The Bible teaches us that God alone is truly good (Romans 3:10-12). The Bible says we are all sinful, every one of us. That doesn’t mean that we are as bad as we

can be, however. Some of us work very hard to be good and not bad. And make no mistake about it, civility and society as we know it would not exist without people trying to be good, rather than giving in to all of their base desires.

But here’s the point—even though we may try to be good all the time, we will inevitably fail. We will inevitably lie, or cheat, or steal, or covet, or be jealous, or envious, or proud, or arrogant, or commit any other number of sins that disqualify us from being perfect. God wasn’t saying that the Pharisee’s works had no value in and of themselves. Doing something good is far better than doing something evil. What God rejected was the idea that our personal goodness could ever be enough to merit eternal life in God’s perfect presence. What the Pharisee felt was what many people feel, that he was good enough. The Pharisee had a false sense of security—because of the legalism that trapped him.

Years ago, a group of teenagers went to a lake in the high Sierras in California in the winter. The lake was frozen and so several of them ventured out on the lake. They thought that the ice was thick enough to support their weight. Only when they felt the ice begin to crack and they began to fall through did they understand their danger. The icy cold water quickly numbed them and prevented them from climbing back out. Several teenagers died, along with several would-be rescuers who tried to save them.

God tells us that trusting in our goodness to gain his favor is like walking on thin ice. In the same way that the thin ice could not bear the weight of those teenagers—even though the ice looked like it could—our good works, no matter how good they are, are not strong enough to merit eternal life. The tax collector was not perfect, but he understood that God is. He understood, even though he was not a religious man like the Pharisee, that God is holy and perfectly righteous. If he was ever going to be accepted and forgiven by God, he knew that it would have to be because of God’s mercy, not his own goodness.

## Grace Leads to a True Love for God

Legalism recasts Christianity—from a relationship with God based upon his love for us—into a fear religion, where we do things, and don't do things—motivated by what God will do to us if we don't behave. People who are enslaved by legalism work hard, at incredible personal sacrifice, to keep what they understand to be God's rules, but usually it is not because they have warm feelings towards God. They seek to obey him more out of fear of punishment if they don't.

People read biblical passages like John 14:15, when Jesus told his disciples, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." Or people read the great command in Deuteronomy 6:5, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."

Unfortunately, many people think passages like this are saying that if we try real hard to obey God, God will be happy with us. Conversely, if we don't, he will be mad at us. But they have it backwards. Jesus didn't say, "Keep my commandments to prove you love me," he said, "if you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Yes, God wants us to behave, but he wants us to behave not out of fear of what he will do to us if we don't, but out of our love for him. When we are driving down a road and see a police car's flashing lights in our rear view mirror, motioning us over, we obey and pull over. We don't do this because of the warm feelings we now have for the officer, but because we respect their authority. We don't stop our car because we just love the police department and we can't wait to pay the fine for violating whatever law we just broke. We pull over and stop our car because we know that we have no alternative.

So, while it is possible to obey authorities without loving them, it is impossible to truly love someone without wanting to please them. Jesus knew that people obeyed God's law for many different reasons. One person can try to be religious and obey God because they feel that if they don't, God will send them to hell, or pun-

ish them in some terrible way. They are not obeying God out of love, but out of fear. Someone else can try and live a good moral life in the belief that such a life would impress God and convince him to let them into heaven. In this case the person is trying to obey God to gain something in return. Again, this is not love, it is merely business: "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours."

And others will do good things and be religious because of what others will think of them. They do what they do to gain a spiritual reputation which they greatly desire.

Christianity is not a business arrangement—it's a love affair. If we love God, we will naturally want to please and obey him. If we love someone, we want them to love us back. It is only natural. The basis upon which all healthy relationships exist is love. If we are parents, we don't want our children to obey us merely out of fear of punishment if they don't. We want them to obey us because they love us. We long for a relationship with them—not some business arrangement where they reluctantly do what we say so that we will be good to them and not punish them. God is no different. Obedience or religious rituals, devoid of a loving relationship with him, do not please him.

Have you ever asked yourself whether or not you truly love God? You may have served him, or you may have tried to serve him (or at least the God that has been described to you for years). You may have volunteered to help with all kinds of wonderful projects to help all kinds of people—you may have faithfully attended your congregation and all of its many activities, you may have financially supported the gospel—but can you honestly say that you love God? Why have you done all these things?

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That's exactly why Jesus said, in Matthew 7:22, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" Those are strong words—but they are given to help us understand the difference between legalism and love—and the need to move from legalism to love, from religion to Christianity.

None of us can obey God perfectly. All of us will fail. But while we cannot offer God perfection, we can offer him what he desires most. Love! We can only really love God when we understand that we are not acceptable to God, or forgiven by God, because of our attempts to be good.

### **Legalism Ignores the True Condition of Our Hearts**

You may have heard the story about the priest who had just arrived in New York City, and was assigned to work in a high crime area populated by the homeless, drug addicts and pushers, along

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with criminals of every description. One night the priest was walking home when suddenly he felt a gun in his ribs. Then he heard a raspy voice: "All right mister, gimme all your money!" The priest quickly reached for his wallet and, as he did, the would-be thief noticed the priest's clerical clothing. The thief was immediately overcome with shame. He said, "Forgive me, Father. I didn't know you were a priest." The priest was a little shaken, but nevertheless replied, "That's all right, my son. Just repent of your sin. Here, have a cigar." The thief replied, "Oh, no, thank you, Father, I don't smoke during Lent."

It is possible to faithfully adhere to the external rituals of religion, but fail to internal-

ize the truths of the faith we claim to hold. It is easy to become a spiritual impostor. Many of us, even with the best of intentions, can, in very short order, become spiritual impostors. We learn how to fake it.

In Matthew 15:1-20 we read the story of Jesus sparring again with the Pharisees. One day the Pharisees came from Jerusalem to where Jesus was, in order to question him. They confronted him about why his disciples did not wash their hands before they ate. The Pharisees weren't referring to the normal practice of washing dirty hands before eating—they were talking about a ritual engaged in solely for religious reasons—a ritual cleansing. The Pharisees, over the years, had taken the law of God given through Moses, and added "clarifications" to it.

These clarifications began going far beyond what the law originally demanded. In many cases they ultimately failed to do justice to the law at all. The truth is we can perform religious rituals without sincerity. But any attempt to fake spirituality before God will always fail. We might fool other humans, but we don't fool God. In the end we only fool ourselves. Are the religious words you say and the religious deeds you perform really what you feel?

What if you suddenly discovered that for many years people close to you had been telling you they loved you and doing kind things for you, yet never really meant it? You wouldn't like it. Neither would I. But it's so easy to do this to God. When we perform some external religious ritual or parrot religious phrases in our prayers to God that do not really reflect the attitudes of our heart, we are merely being legalistic. We are faking it.

Paul Eldridge once said; "We mold our faces to fit our masks." Legalism is the "foundation" of spiritual cosmetics—legalism drives us to put on an act to impress others who themselves are putting on an act to impress us.

When a politician, movie star or famous personality is caught doing something that tarnishes their public image—from which they derive their

lucrative livelihood—public relations firms are hired to engage in damage control. Soon their client is seen helping the homeless, walking for AIDS research and serving at soup kitchens for the hungry. But the key word is *seen*. They make sure there are plenty of cameras to record the moment and their “selfless act.” Ironically, in many cases, the personalities show up to the places of service, don the appropriate uniforms, get their pictures taken and then promptly leave. Their service was all for show, for public consumption.

In spite of the fact that we might fight against it, we tend to shape ourselves in the image others have of us. We work hard to maintain the impression others have of us, even if their impression is essentially wrong.

God is not pleased when we do good things for bad reasons. If he were, then a mass murderer could clear his record with God by volunteering at a soup kitchen, a rapist could change God’s opinion of him by sending flowers to his victim.

### **Grace Leads Us Out of Slavery and Into Freedom**

Legalism imprisons, but it is self-imprisonment, much like the Japanese soldier who hid for 28 years in the cave. Legalism, attempting to please God by our own efforts, is destined to fail because none of us can keep the law perfectly. So we experience a constant fear, fear that we haven’t been good enough, fear that we won’t measure up—that we won’t make God’s final cut before we make the kingdom of heaven team. This fear of failure leads us to try even harder to be good, only to be further depressed by our inevitable failures.

Legalism teaches us that our relationship with God is totally within our control and dependent upon our own actions. But how can any of us hope to please a perfectly holy and just God? Legalism constantly creates more and more man made laws to cover more situations. This can lay

a tremendous burden upon our spiritual shoulders. It becomes a heavy weight on our souls.

The burden of trying to be perfect can be overwhelming and keeps us continually living in guilt and shame.

It’s hard enough to keep human laws, much less the perfect laws of God. But the good news is that Jesus came to remove that burden, not to add to it. Paul says in Galatians 5:1, “It is for

freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

Since we couldn’t keep the law perfectly, God came to us in the person of Jesus to do for us what we can never do for ourselves. Jesus came to keep the law perfectly for us and offer himself as a sacrifice for our sins—the judgment we deserved for our spiritual failure. Jesus’ death paid the penalty for our sins. It is his perfect sacrifice for us on the cross that sets us free.

We can never please God by our futile attempts to perfectly obey him, but we can please him by placing our faith in his grace. There is freedom in God’s grace. It is an incredible freedom to realize it is not our good works or religious activities that make us pleasing to God, but our faith in his beautiful act of love for us on the cross.

During World War II, the Nazis built concentration camps designed to literally destroy an entire race—the Jews. While Jewish prisoners were forced to slave away for their cruel masters, no matter how much they did what they were told their reward was the same—torture and death.

But when the war was over, the Allies, who had conquered the Nazis, came upon these death camps the Nazis had abandoned. Upon seeing the plight of these prisoners, the Allies set the prisoners free, comforted them, fed them, nursed them back to health and released them from

*Legalism leads us to feel arrogant and superior about our spirituality, bypassing the more important issue of sincerity.*

their bondage. Even those who were too far gone to be helped died free. Their freedom was not the result of how hard they had worked in the camps, nor how obedient they had been. While they were under the yoke of the Nazis, they were slaves. Nothing they could do could alter their condition.

In the same way, each one of us who has tried and tried to keep the law, to obey the law of God perfectly, has found a cruel taskmaster. The law could not free us, it could only condemn us. The law remains a constant reminder of what we have failed to do, or be. We needed someone who could come and defeat our enemy who held us captive.

That is what Jesus did. Paul says in Galatians 3:23-25, "...we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law."

### **Legalism Robs Us of an Intimate Relationship with God**

The great error in legalism is that it focuses on what we do, rather than what God does. When we believe, like the Pharisee in the Temple, that our own goodness is acceptable to God, we are, in effect, looking at the marvelous sacrifice of God in sending his only begotten Son to die for us and saying, "So what?" What our soul needs more than anything is the truth—even if it's hard to hear. We can never hope to have a relationship with God without accepting his assessment of our true condition.

Think of it this way. If you go to the doctor and they inform you that you have cancer, it is unpleasant news. You don't want to hear it—but it is important that you do, because only then can you begin to seek the cure. If you are afraid you might have cancer and avoid the doctor because you don't want to hear the bad news, you may sentence yourself to a worse physical condition, one that might have been cured.

Lying to yourself may make you feel better, but what does it do to your soul? It is natural to avoid unpleasant truths because they can be hard to swallow. But truth, like medicine, isn't designed to make us feel better, but to heal us. Legalism is self religion—feel good, look good religion. But legalism never even scratches the surface of our deepest need, which is to know and to find peace with the God who made us.

You don't have to be perfect for God to love you. God loves you, not because you are lovable, but because it is his nature to love you. He wants to free you from slavery to religious appearances and lies, designed to cover up the real truth. He wants to free you from the terrible burden of trying to keep up a religious facade. How can we hope to draw close to God if we aren't sure about how he feels about us at any given moment? It is only when we are sure of his love for us, even when we fail, that we can draw close to him.

### **Grace Focuses on God's Goodness, Not Ours**

The liberating truth of the Bible is that it is God's goodness and righteousness that enable us to be acceptable to him, not our own. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." Titus 3:4-5 echoes that truth: "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."

Grace allows us to focus on God's goodness instead of our own as the means to providing us peace with God and eternal life. We can finally admit our failure, because Christ succeeded for us where we failed. Legalism's answer to our sin is to try and be better. God's answer to our sin is his grace. Because of this we see God in an entirely new light. Instead of a distant, aloof divine being bent on pointing out our weaknesses and judging us for them, he becomes the personal God who left his heavenly home to come

and pay the ultimate cost for our failure. But he did it because of love. This is a God we can draw close to.

When we truly love God, we will want to obey him, but our motivation for obeying him has changed. We will no longer be seeking to obey God's commands in order to try and earn God's favor and work our way into heaven. Our new motivation for obeying his commands will be gratitude and love.

Are you ready to leave legalism behind and journey into the freedom of God's grace and mercy?

### **QUESTIONS TO PONDER**

- 1)** Is faith really just a leap into the darkness?
- 2)** How can an intelligent, educated person exercise faith?
- 3)** If I develop a personal faith, will I become a fanatic?
- 4)** What is faith, and how does it work?
- 5)** Are people who believe in God the only people who exercise faith?
- 6)** How does faith change someone? What does it do to them?
- 7)** If you accept something by faith, does that mean what you believe is unscientific?
- 8)** Is faith a one time act, or a lifestyle?

These and other questions will be discussed and answered in our next volume, *Journey to Faith, Volume 4: Faith That Makes Sense*