

INTRODUCTION:

In the time of the early church, there were people in the churches who were teaching that once you became a Christian, you still had to obey the Jewish regulations and rituals to be religiously correct. That kind of false teaching still exists in the 21st Century. Last time we were studying from Colossians I taught a message called “Beware of Grace Robbers” where I gave you an overview about the dangers of dead, dull, legalism in the church and in your personal Christian walk. Today, let’s dig a little deeper and get a bit more specific on a few issues you will all encounter in your walk with God.

Let’s read what the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write about the problem of Grace-robbers:

Colossians 2:16-18. *“Therefore [remember, never start at a “therefore” in the Bible– glance back to verse 14 to review that truth that when Jesus died on the cross, God took away all the Old Testament rules and regulations and nailed them to the cross] do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”*

Who here owns a dog? Some dogs can be very strange and do some really funny stuff. We own a dog called Abby and once when it thundered during a storm, she got so scared she tried climbing through the tiny cat flap in our security sliding door! It could only fit her head but she’s trying to get through. I’ve seen some dogs do other funny things like chasing shadows. There was this dog and a bird was flying around nearby creating a shadow on the ground. The dog was barking at the shadow on the ground, and chasing after that shadow when it moved! But the dog never figured out that the shadow wasn’t real.

Sadly, there are many well-meaning Christians who are doing the same thing. They are chasing shadows: They are still trying to please God by keeping religious rules and observing religious rituals. This message is called ‘**Chasing Shadows of Grace**’ and I want to examine some of the substitutes for grace, and then talk about the differences between legalism-based churches and grace-based churches.

I. CHEAP SUBSTITUTES FOR GRACE

Do you know what a shadow is? The scientific answer is: *“An area that is not or is only partially irradiated or illuminated because of the interception of radiation by an opaque object between the area and the source of radiation.”* To put it simply, shadows are merely a one-dimensional outline of the real thing. When you see a person’s shadow around the corner in the late afternoon, you know that person is coming soon behind it. You don’t greet the shadow, you greet the person. Those who are chasing spiritual shadows are still trying to please God by focusing on the shadow, not the real thing. Keeping religious rules and observing religious rituals in order to be close to God are only a shadow of the “real thing,” a relationship with Him through Jesus. Jesus is the substance of grace and legalism chases the shadowy substitutes for grace. In this passage we find three legalistic substitutes for grace.

(1) Dietary Regulations

Our text says, *“do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink.”* The Old Testament contains a long list of foods that were clean and unclean. For instance, the Jews could eat beef, but they were forbidden to eat pork. They could eat fish with scales, but not fish without scales, like catfish. To this day, Orthodox Jews only eat Kosher foods (the word “kosher comes from the Hebrew word for “fitting” or “proper”). There are some groups that call themselves Christians still observing these Old Testament dietary regulations. They would tell you if you’re eating bacon or ham, you can’t be right with God. But the Bible clearly states these regulations are no longer in effect.

But the legalistic attitude about food and drink can go beyond the Old Testament. There are plenty of people around today who will try to condemn you based upon what you consume. Man, if they'd see what I eat for breakfast every morning – bacon and eggs!! But then I also must be very careful not to judge someone who chooses to eat as a vegetarian. I can't help but remember that old Ingham's Chicken commercials where it ends with the tagline, *"Because if you don't like chicken, there's something very wrong with you!"* Boy, didn't that create a stir?! But as believers in the Bible, we must understand that those who enjoy their meat cannot point fingers at those who choose not to and say WEAK WEIRDOS!!! And vice versa, those who have convictions about only eating non-animal foods cannot point to the bacon lovers and say, UNCLEAN HELL-BOUND HEATHENS!!

In Matthew 15, Jesus made it clear it's not what goes into the mouth and stomach of a person that defiles him. It is what comes out of the heart that defiles a person. These Old Testament dietary rules were nailed to the cross and we don't have to obey them anymore. It's not about the kind of food or drink you consume. It's not even about eating and drinking the bread and wine for Communion. We need to stop chasing shadows of grace and come to the real thing... the Christian life is knowing Jesus.

(2) Religious Holidays - The Bible goes on to say, *"do not let anyone judge you with regard to a religious festival, or a New Moon celebration."* The Hebrew lunar calendar was 360 days long based on the phases of the moon. Every year, the Jews celebrated four major festivals: (1) Passover in the spring; (2) followed by the Feast of weeks, or Pentecost; (3) In the fall there was the Festivals of Tabernacles; (4) followed by the Day of Atonement, called Yom Kippur. In addition, there were monthly festivals (new moon celebration) and special celebrations every seven years and 50 years. They loved their holidays!

But before we're too harsh on them, let's remember we have more holidays than the Jews. New Year's Day; Australia Day, Good Friday, Easter Saturday, Easter Sunday, Easter Monday, Anzac Day, Labour Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Queen's Birthday, Ekka People's Day, Melbourne Cup Day, Christmas Day, Boxing Day. Then if you look on the National Day Calendar, you will see some more crazy days that people celebrate such as: yesterday was National Fried Chicken Day, today is National Strawberry Sundae Day, tomorrow is National Chocolate with Almonds Day, Tuesday is National Sugar Cookie Day, Wednesday is National Pina Colada Day, Thursday is National 7-Eleven Day, and Friday is National Eat Your Jelly Day. Who comes up with these things???

But the reality is that legalism rears its ugly head when we take our holidays more seriously than the things they are commemorating. For instance, sometimes on Father's Day I don't always preach a Father's Day message and some people have said they were disappointed. The complaints triple when I don't preach a Mother's Day message! But am I intentionally trying to ignore Mums and Dads? Not at all! It's just that I never want my teaching to be calendar driven. God has called me to systematically and consistently teach the Bible verse after verse, line upon line, precept upon precept.

The whole point of this passage is we aren't to let someone JUDGE us about whether or not we observe the exact holidays they observe. Perhaps I could upset some of you by telling you that December 25 really wasn't the actual birth date of Jesus, or that our English word "Easter" comes from *Eostre*, an ancient pagan goddess. But I won't even chase those rabbits, because people are so sensitive about how they celebrate their holidays.

What's the point? These religious holidays were only shadows. For instance, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, a spotless lamb was sacrificed for the forgiveness of the sins of the Israelites. That was a shadow. When Jesus came onto the scene, John the Baptist said, *"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)* No more shadows! Jesus is the light of the world that causes the shadows. Sadly, the Jews kept chasing the shadows when the real Lamb came along! When we start idolizing the holiday itself rather than the truth behind the holiday, we can be guilty of chasing shadows of grace, too rather than enjoying real grace.

(3) Sabbath Observance

The third substitute for grace is found in these words from our text, *“do not let anyone judge you with regard to a Sabbath day.”* What day is the Sabbath day? There are two extreme mistakes people often make about the Biblical Sabbath. (1) Some people insist that the Fourth Commandment is still in effect and Christians should worship and do no work on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. They claim we are wrong, because we are worshiping on Sunday. I’ve heard some groups even say those of us who worship on Sunday bear the mark of the beast mentioned in Revelation. It’s extremely important to note the Bible lists the Sabbath observance in the same category of dietary laws and Jewish holidays. My friend, if you worship on Sunday, never let anyone condemn you with regard to a Sabbath. The requirement to keep the Jewish Sabbath was nailed to the cross, and God took it out of the way.

But the other Sabbath mistake is just as dangerous. (2) It is the belief that somewhere in the Bible, Sunday become the Christian Sabbath. Through the years, there have been many Christians who have tried to treat Sunday like the Jewish Sabbath. In the 4th Century, the Roman Emperor Constantine outlawed work on the day of the Sun—but it wasn’t for any particular religious reason.

Later it became part of official Roman Catholic dogma that God changed the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. Even after the Protestant Reformation, Christians still followed this unbiblical belief. The 17th Century theocratic Puritans established laws responsible for many of our false ideas about Sunday. Laws that prohibited certain businesses from opening on Sundays, or prohibiting a variety of activities in addition to Sunday commerce. There were laws that stipulated stiff punishment for those who didn’t attend church on the Sabbath (Sunday). Swearing, dancing, lacy clothes, blasphemy, and card playing were prohibited along with many other terrible sins. By the way, these same Puritans outlawed any Christmas observances as well, and Easter observance they labelled as ‘The Devil’s Holiday’.

However, we see in the New Testament that the early church worshiped on Sunday (the first day of the week) because the resurrection of Jesus was discovered on a Sunday morning—but it is not a day more holy than any other day. The Bible never directs us to treat Sunday as the Old Testament Sabbath. The word “Shabbat” doesn’t mean “seventh” it means “rest.” And Jesus is the substance behind the shadow. ***We don’t need a Sabbath day, because we have a Sabbath Person.*** No longer do we have to work for salvation, we only have to rest (“Shabbat”) in Jesus. He said, *“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you SHABBAT.” (Matthew 11:28)*

So, if someone asks me, “Which day is the Sabbath day?” My answer is, “Saturday is the Sabbath day...and Sunday is the Sabbath Day...and Monday is the Sabbath Day...and Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday are the Sabbath Day.” Because all day, every day, I am resting in Jesus. I’m not chasing shadows of grace; I’m resting in Jesus—the substance behind the shadow!

II. CONGREGATIONAL SIGNS OF GRACE

Legalism is a terrible threat to the spiritual health of churches and individual Christians. It’s the CANCER of the Christian life. There are legalistic churches and grace-based churches. It’s important you are able to distinguish between the two. Some people prefer legalist churches, because when they follow the rules it gives them a chance to feel they are doing well as a Christian—especially compared to the other people who aren’t keeping the rules as much as they are. I’d like to make five points of contrasts between legalism-based congregations and grace-based congregations.

(1) LEGALISM-BASED congregations tend to be JUDGMENTAL and CRITICAL.

Members of legalistic churches tend to pick at each other and pick at others. Their mentality is “I’m doing real well compared to other people.” A legalistic Christian compares himself to other people, and he likes what he sees.

GRACE-BASED congregations demonstrate ACCEPTANCE and a DESIRE TO HELP people who have problems. Grace doesn’t ignore or minimize flaws and faults. But the attitude of a grace based church isn’t “You can’t come here until you clean up your act.” It’s more like, “How can we help you be set free from your addictions and problems?” If a person desires help, a grace-based Christian will go out of their way to help that person.

(2) In LEGALISM-BASED churches it is important to MAINTAIN APPEARANCES. You really can’t afford to be honest about your faults and struggles in a legalistic church, because they will cut you out of the herd. If you start talking about how many problems you have, you’re going to be judged faster than you can blink your speck-filled eye. In a legalistic church, your Christian friends would be the last people you would tell about your problems. You would tell a co-worker or a counsellor, but you can’t afford to let your guard down at church. After all, appearances must be maintained at all costs.

In contrast, in a **GRACE-BASED church there is HONESTY and TRANSPARENCY.** People are able to be vulnerable and admit they have problems. In a grace based church a person can tell his or her friends, “I’m struggling with this addiction, or prescription drugs, or with anger...will you please pray for me?” And the response should be, “Yes, of course I’ll pray for you and with you.” The Bible says, *“Share each other’s burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)*

(3) A LEGALISM-BASED congregation creates INTER-PERSONAL DISTANCE. In other words, members may seem outwardly friendly. They will smile and shake your hand, and may even offer you a brotherly or sisterly hug. But while legalism creates acquaintances, it seldom produces true friendships. You have to hold people at arm’s length. You have to build walls so that nobody can find out how messed up you may be.

GRACE-BASED congregations encourage INTER-PERSONAL CLOSENESS. Grace creates an atmosphere in which you can find friends who will love you... warts and all. The love goes deeper than a smile and handshake. Grace gives us the power to love and accept someone as a friend, even though we know all about their weaknesses and faults. Legalism keeps a long list of rules, and keeps score about everyone is doing. But according to **1 Corinthians 13:5** *“Love keeps no record of wrongs.”*

(4) LEGALISM-BASED congregations emphasize EXTERNAL RIGHTEOUSNESS. Legalists are interested in things like the clothes you wear to church; for guys, the length of your hair is important and whether you wear a tie. For ladies you may be judged by whether you have on makeup, or excess makeup, or too much gaudy jewellery. And of course, tattoos and piercings aren’t just taboo, they are of the devil and therefore you’re not welcome in that church. In some churches one of the first questions you have to answer is, “What version of the Bible do you have? And if it isn’t the KJV then you’re out! ” The list goes on and on...remember, a legalist is someone whose list of sins are longer than God’s list.

GRACE-BASED congregations focus on CHRIST’S RIGHTEOUSNESS, which is the only kind of righteousness that God recognizes. The critics of the gospel of grace often claim those who teach grace teach an “anything goes” kind of theology. But grace doesn’t teach that there are no standards or rules. Understanding grace gives you a desire to please God—not to earn His favour, but because you are loved, and you love Him which is expressed by a desire to obey His voice and commands.

Finally **(5) LEGALISM-BASED congregations create a spirit of UNDERLYING DEPRESSION.** On the surface, there may be a thin veneer of happiness, where people “put on a happy face” but at the heart there is deadness and depression. The reason for that is because they are constantly reminded of what a failure they are. For example, if you went to the doctor and he discovered you had cancer, how would you feel on every visit if all he did was bring out your MRI or X-ray and say, “You’ve got cancer! That’s right. You’ve got cancer, and if you don’t do something about it you’re going to die.” The next week you get the same speech, “You’ve got cancer! Look, here’s the proof. You’ve got cancer and if you don’t do something about it you’re going to die!” Before much more of that you’d say, “Yeah, doc, I know I’ve got cancer, but tell me what I can do have it cured!” If all he ever did was pound away at your cancer, you’d do well to get another doctor! And so it is vitally important in churches that week after week after week, people are not continually reminded of how sinful they are and that all sinners go to hell.... that is the same as being beaten up week after week after week.

In stark contrast, **GRACE-BASED churches are characterized by a spirit of RELEASE, LIBERTY, and JOY.** The law binds us, but grace sets us free. Legalism frustrates, but grace liberates. The attitude present in a grace-based church isn’t that we’re a bunch of perfect people, but that we are bunch of sinners who have been forgiven—and are being forgiven, even though there’s nothing in our lives that would merit or deserve God’s grace. That kind of truth will set you free and fill you with real joy.

CONCLUSION

When you’re outdoors in the Australian environment during the summer, you’d better have a can of RID or some other insect repellent. If you don’t, those pesky mosquitoes will feed on your flesh and blood. Insect repellent is formulated to keep them away from you. Do you know what legalism really is? It’s Jesus repellent. Legalism actually drives away sinners who are seeking forgiveness. Lost people may go to a legalistic church seeking God, but when they see the list of rules, they are turned off, because they think they can’t keep them all. They are seeking God, but what they find is a long list of dos and don’ts. They look at dead, strict, joyless legalists and say, “If that’s what the Christian life is, I don’t want to be like that!”

You may be thinking, “Johnny, are you saying that we ought to try to make the gospel attractive to sinners?” Not at all. In fact, we don’t have to make the gospel attractive – it already IS! It’s called Good News! If legalism is like repellent, the gospel of grace is like walking through a mall and smelling the fragrance of one of those places that bake fresh hot bread! You can’t eat the fragrance, but you can follow your nose to the place where you can eat. Grace doesn’t save you— Jesus does. But grace is the aroma that leads us to Jesus.

God wants to set you free from the notion that the Christian Life is about a special diet; or special dates; or a special day. It’s all about *Christ in you, the hope of glory* (Col. 1:27). Stop chasing the shadows of religious performance and surrender to Jesus who will fill you with His grace!