

## **“When Legalism Becomes Grace”**

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John 14:15-21

Do you love God? Some of you might say, “Well of course I love God. That’s why I’m here this morning. It would have been easy to stay home today, just sleep in on a cool, cloudy day. That’s why I’m here this morning, because I love God.”

Some people might come to church just to be seen. It’s good for business. “You know, old Sam is in church every Sunday. He must be honest. We can trust him. We’ll patronize his business.”

Someone else might say, “Of course I love God. I love my neighbor! That’s how you can tell I love God.” But even an atheist can love his neighbor. That’s not proof that you love God.

Someone else might say, “Yeah, I love God. I read my Bible.” But, we know people who are seeking. Certain people who are not of any faith read the Bible, kind of like a history book. That’s not proof that you love God.

Someone else might say, “I love God because I pray to God.” But we know that it is possible to even pray selfish prayers, the kind of prayers that says the one we love the most is me.

How do you love God? How do you show your love for God? Jesus said we can do all these things and still not love God. There is something else involved. It is a part of our scripture today. I mentioned earlier the farewell discourse in that first part of the 14<sup>th</sup> Chapter. Jesus has said to the disciples that he will be going away. Philip is concerned. He doesn’t know what Jesus means. He doesn’t know where Jesus is going. So Philip says, “Show us the father.” Jesus says “Philip, have I been with you *so* long and you don’t understand? If you see me, you’ve seen the father.” Then these words, “If you love, me, (or we might say if you love God), you will keep my commandments. Jesus said if we love him, if we love God, you will keep the commandments.

How does that sound to you? In our tradition, especially, don’t we say, “Where’s the grace?” That’s just too legalistic!” You know the one group that Jesus despised was the Pharisees. He couldn’t stand their legalism. They knew all of the law—they obeyed the commandments, but they didn’t get it. Is that the kind of relationship we want with God, a relationship based on legalism?

Remember a few years ago. Some of you might have said these words in your marriage ceremony. “I promise to love, honor, and obey.” We took those words out, didn’t we? We don’t need that. A guy after the first service this morning said, “You know, that was just in there for the women,” and I said, “I know that.” I said, “They’ve changed it now—it’s just for the men.” He didn’t know what to think about

that. One woman said after the service, "When was that changed? I think I said it in our ceremony but I can't remember for sure." Love, honor, and obey. Do we want a relationship with God that is based on obedience? Where is the grace in that?

One of my favorite theologians, a man by the name of William Muehl has said the most abused theological concept is the concept of grace. Muehl has said some people say, "I can do anything I want and God will forgive me. No holds barred—anything. God will forgive. That is what God does." But Muehl reminds us of this, a part of the meaning of the Genesis story. Do you remember that story? That story, Muehl says, tells us we are not only able to discern between good and evil, we have an obligation to do so. In other words, not only can we tell the difference between right and wrong, we have a responsibility to do what is right. When we do that, perhaps we understand God's grace in a way that we didn't before.

Then we say to God what the disciples said to Jesus, "This just seems too difficult. You know we can't keep all the rules you have for us." In effect the story in the Bible says that's right. That's why we have an old covenant and a new covenant. That's why Jesus said, "I will leave you an advocate, a counselor, a comforter, a helper, a protector." Kids today would say Jesus would say to us, "I've got your back. No matter what happens, I've got your back. I'll be there to take care of you."

We need that, we say, to be able to do all that God wants us to do. Still, do we want the kind of relationship that is based on legalism and obedience? Truthfully, and Jesus talks about the Spirit of Truth here, most of us would prefer a relationship with God that is based on works instead of grace. In the church, we are accused of being hypocrites. One reason that hurts so much is because we know it's true. We don't live up to what we claim to be.

The Danish theologian, Kierkegaard said, "The truth in the mouth of one whose life gives no evidence of the truth is nonsense." That's what the world says to us, "You say one thing, but you live another thing." We say we want a relationship with God that is based on grace, but secretly inside we want to earn it, don't we?

Let me give you an example. A true story . . . a woman, I'll call her Zelda. That's not her real name. She came to see me. She was concerned about her sister who had never been baptized. Her sister had never been a member of any church. As we visited for a while, it was obvious that there was something wrong in the relationship between Zelda and her sister. Her sister had hurt Zelda, and Zelda had never forgiven her sister for what she had done.

I said, "Zelda, do you believe that God loves your sister as much as God loves you?" She didn't answer. But you could tell Zelda was thinking, "But I'm the one who's been good. I'm the one who goes to church every Sunday." All she said was, "I hope you're right!" She didn't really mean it, did she?

We feel that we need to earn God's grace, that we deserve God's grace. How can we claim this grace for ourselves? How can we realize that every day of our lives is a gift

of grace? Listen to these words of the old preacher, Oswald Chambers:

“When we pray relying on the Holy Spirit, God will always bring us back to this one point; we are not heard because we are in earnest, or because we need to be heard, or because we will perish if we are not heard. We are heard only on the ground of God’s grace.”

This says to me that every person has value in God’s sight. Do you remember the hymn of community we sang, “Are ye able to remember when a thief lifts up his eyes, that his pardoned soul is worthy of a place in paradise?” Do we really believe that? Do we want God’s grace for everyone or just for ourselves? How often we are quick to criticize and complain when what others need from us is our encouragement and support.

A wonderful Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen, has written about this. Nouwen says, “When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives have been the most important to us, we often find that it’s those who, instead of giving advice, solutions or cures, have chosen to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand.”

This is the Michelin part of the sermon. This is where the rubber hits the road. I am not just talking about the thief on the cross or the homeless person who has value in God’s sight. I’m talking about those persons who are closest to you: spouse, children, parents, friends. What they need from us is not advice, solutions or cures. What they need is a loving touch—a Christ-like, grace-like touch. Let me give you three examples of how we can share and receive God’s grace in our life.

True story. We knew a couple one time. It was difficult to see them together. The woman did everything she could to belittle her husband. She would say things to him in front of people that were so embarrassing that he would literally be on the verge of tears. This woman had a stroke and so the husband had to put her in a nursing home. This angry, spiteful woman became even angrier in the nursing home. She was hostile. There’s been a lot in the news recently about bitterness. If you looked up the word “bitterness” in the dictionary, you’d see a picture of this woman.

Still, her husband went to the nursing home to visit her every day, not because he wanted to, not because he enjoyed it, not because he didn’t have anything else to do. In fact, he served on the committee that was making plans for their high school reunion. While serving on that committee, he met a woman, an old classmate, a long-lost friend of his whose spouse had died. They began to visit and it was obvious there might be more than just friendship in their relationship. He could have been spending time with her, but still, day after day after week after week, after month after month after year after year, at least once a day he went to see his wife—not because he wanted to, not because of what God would do to him if he didn’t visit her, not because he thought he would earn something from God if he visited her, but simply because he believed it was the right thing to do. It was his duty as a husband. I would like to tell you that after a period of time this woman became transformed, but it didn’t happen. She remained as bitter and

hostile than ever. But people who knew the man saw a change. He was the one who became transformed because for him legalism turned into grace.

Another true story. An adult woman was forced to care for her elderly father. Years ago when she was just a little girl, her father had abused her. Still, she cared for him and took him into her own home not because she wanted to, not because she enjoyed it, but because she believed it was her responsibility as a daughter to care for her father. I would like to tell you that the father was transformed, that at some point he was able to say, "Will you please forgive me for what I did to you?" But that never happened. Those who knew her, however, began to see a change in this woman. She did what she did not because she was afraid of God, or because she was trying to earn something from God, but simply because she believed it was her duty as a daughter to love her father. To her, legalism became grace.

There is one more story. It is a story of a church full of people. In this church there was a crisis of ministerial leadership among several ministers who served the church. The church members began to squabble and bicker with each other. It got so bad that at some point some members of the church wondered if the church would survive. But those who stayed in the church hung in, there not because they felt like God would punish them if they did not do that or they could earn something from God, but simply because it was their responsibility as Christians to be the church. I would like to tell you that the church was transformed, but that remains to be seen because this is our story. That transformation will happen, legalism will become grace for us only when each one of us is able to say, "I will be obedient to you, Lord." If that happens and when it happens, legalism can become grace for us. Amen.