

**“DO BETTER, BE BETTER, TRY HARDER.”**

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**Scripture Texts: Galatians 3:2-5; Ephesians 2:8-10; II Timothy 1:9**

### **Introduction.**

When Phama and I went on a mission trip to China in 2004 we had the opportunity to go to the western part of China near what used to be Tibet and encounter the Buddhist religion. We saw lots of Buddhist monks and temples. A common feature of Buddhism is prayer wheels. Cylinders with a prayer mantra written on it and inside of it, the first syllable is Om.

According to Tibetan Buddhist tradition spinning a prayer wheel has the same meritorious effect as orally reciting the prayers.

“Just touching and turning a prayer wheel brings incredible purification and accumulates unbelievable merit.”

Each revolution is as meritorious as reading the inscription aloud as many times as it is written on the scroll, and this means that the more prayer mantras that are inside a prayer wheel, the more powerful it is. One on-line site advertises their prayer wheel this way:

“Our prayer wheels contain millions and even billions of the Tibetan Buddhist mantra "Om Mani Padme Hung." The mantras were carefully reproduced on microfilm to allow a large number of mantras to fit inside each prayer wheel.”

Buddhist temples will have rows and rows of large prayer wheels that you just walk by to spin. And there are many that are powered by water, wind, solar panels or heat from a candle or fire.

That sounds utterly foreign to all of us and we feel sadness for millions of people trapped in such a performance, merit-based religion. We can't imagine ever doing something like that.

Except that we all live in a performance-based world.

We grow up in homes where our parents set demands and have expectations based on performance, obedience, keeping the rules. We can often feel like we don't measure up, we can't please them, no matter how hard we try.

We spend years in schools working to make good grades, trying to measure up to some standard set by our teachers. Then we enter the work force where we are judged, evaluated and promoted or let go based on performance.

Many of us still feel like we are on a treadmill, trying to gain acceptance or approval from someone. From our parents, our spouse, our friends, our co-workers, our church.

And all of this spills over into our faith and our relationship with God.

Another word for this is legalism, all the do's and don'ts.

The performance trap or legalism is one of the great hindrances or obstacles to understanding the Gospel and to preaching the Gospel to ourselves. In the spirit of last week's props, I thought about dragging a treadmill up here to illustrate the performance treadmill we are all on. It's one of the enemy's favorite tools to keeping us from seeing God's grace.

I also thought about going from glasses to spinning plates. You have seen those people who get a dozen plates spinning on long spindles and race from one to the next to keep them all spinning.

Let's get a grip on the problem of legalism and then on the solution in a cross-centered understanding of the Gospel.

## **Legalism.**

Let's define legalism so we are on the same page.

There are *Pharisee type legalist* who add man-made laws and rules to God's law. They added hundreds of rules for everything from what you could do on the Sabbath to washing hands.

And we still do the same thing.

Many of you grew up with a lot of legalism about Sundays or how you keep your yard or washing your car or your windows or play cards or dancing or listening to certain music

or going to movies or where you go to school. Some denominations have rules about makeup or girls wearing pants.

When I was a student at Wheaton College they had a code of standards we had to sign and live by. No drinking, no card playing, no dancing. I remember playing Rook because that was OK because it didn't use a real deck of cards, it was Wheaton poker.

We can have our preferences and we can make decisions to do or not do certain things. The danger comes when those things become a test of our Christianity or spirituality or a way of judging righteousness.

Then there is *rich young ruler type legalist*. He asked what he must do to be saved as though he could earn or work for his salvation.

*There are basically only two religions in the world.*

One says, "If you will do such and such, then God will bless you or save you or deliver you or whatever." The only difference between all of those religions is what the *such and such* is. Bathe in this river, kiss that rock, go to that city, do this work, perform that ritual, or even, if you will just say a prayer and give your heart to Jesus (John Reisinger).

The second religion says, "God makes us willing and able to be saved and to put our faith in Him." The first is built on the foundation of works, the second on the foundation of grace.

The problem is the first kind of religion has creep into the second kind of religion. Legalism is rampant in every denomination of Christianity. It is our fleshly nature, it is what we do. And it is just as destructive as ever, spreading lies and creating guilt and depression and despair.

We are all born legalists. I spent the first 16 years of my life thinking I could earn or deserve heaven. We could call this *Nike Christianity, Just do it!* Do better, be better, try harder. It's a message that Muslims and Buddhists could embrace.

Nike Christianity preaches Get Better sermons like 10 Steps, 5 Ways, 3 Easy Life Hacks to a Better Future. Self-help sermons often just reinforce our feelings of inadequacy.

***Legalism*** is any attempt to achieve forgiveness or acceptance or favor or blessing from God through keeping the rules, by our obedience to the Law of God. Legalism is any time we put the law over the Gospel.

Legalism is a form of self-worship. If I can justify myself through my works and actions, then the glory and praise belongs to me. Good for me, look what I did, look how I am better than them.

Legalism says either the death of Jesus wasn't enough, and I need to add to what Jesus did, or it wasn't even necessary at all, "it's OK Jesus, I got this."

Legalism creeps in as Jesus gets smaller and our faith in Him shrinks. The smaller Jesus is the harder we have to work to make up the difference. When Jesus is small He doesn't inspire worship and awe and praise and a desire to obey.

Someone might say, "But, pastor, God is the one who gave us the 10 Commandments, so He must certainly care about us keeping the rules and obeying and doing what's right."

Yes, but that's not the whole story. What is the context of the 10 Commandments? When and where did God give them? On Mt. Sinai right. But what had already happened before then?

First, God chose the nation of Israel out of pure grace and nothing they did. Then God graciously rescued and redeemed them out of bondage in Egypt and made a covenant with them in which He said He would be their God, He would be in a personal relationship with them, He would be a loving, compassionate Father to them and they would be His children.

What was it based on? Grace. Grace alone. Only after that did God say what kind of laws would be pleasing to Him. Their relationship wasn't based on their keeping the laws.

First comes our acceptance by God then comes our response of obedience for what we have already received. Legalism is putting the cart before the horse.

But you say there were blessings and curses. Yes, there were, and there was discipline for disobedience and they even were exiled out of the Promised Land for a while, but God remained their God and they remained His people and He never changed His covenant with them.

People who focus on rules, do's and don'ts, miss the context, miss the love and grace and end up having neither, they don't have love or relationship.

Legalists forget that God's Law isn't about do's and don'ts, it's a reflection of God's character. To obey the Law is to delight in God and want to be more like Him. To obey is to realize that His way is the highest and best.

### ***Where do we see the legalism in our own lives?***

You might be caught on the performance treadmill or in the performance trap if:

You believe God loves you more when you are doing everything right.

You feel like you have to get your act together or clean up some messes in your life first.

You are not good enough for God to use you.

You tithe to the penny.

You judge others by their appearance or how they act.

When you sin and ask forgiveness, you still feel guilty for a while, until you show you are doing the right things again for a while.

You are more concerned about covering up your sin rather than confessing it.

When someone gives you a gift, you feel pressure to reciprocate in some way.

There is a right and wrong way to do everything. That's why you do things yourself.

If someone drops by your house, you feel panic over how your house looks.

You do life by a check list, a ledger with good and bad, trying to measure up, keeping score.

You are more comfortable with rules than relationships.

You feel like God is a policeman rather than like a Father.

You beat yourself up when you make a mistake, especially if it affects other people.

Why do you do what you do? Why don't you do what you don't do? Fear or love, duty or joy?

Do you do them to avoid God's displeasure or do you do them to delight yourself in God and in God's goodness toward you?

The bondage of legalism has to do with motive and intent. Do I read my Bible to score brownie points and stay in God's good graces, or because I know it is filled with wisdom and truth, because I want to know God more?

### **The Liberty of Grace.**

Against this idea of merit stands the Gospel of free unmerited, unearned, undeserved grace from God. This is the liberty of the Gospel.

The Gospel is God's good news that He knows it is impossible for us to keep all His righteous laws and so He has come to provide a way for us to be accepted by Him and that way is His grace through Jesus.

Do you see what God has done? He has deliberately designed the Gospel, so it is none of our doing, so there can be no pride, no boasting; only humility and gratitude.

That's why it's amazing grace, because we deserved nothing and did nothing. We're freely accepted by God and should be amazed by it and joyful because of it. In the words of Paul:

**Romans 7:24-25** Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?  
25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

God owes us nothing and we can never get Him in our debt to where He is obligated to give us something. When we come empty, He is free to fill us with Himself.

I have decided to leave this *full and overflowing glass* here as a symbol of our focus on the Gospel and preaching the Gospel to ourselves. This is what the grace of God looks like.

Notice you can't add anything to this glass. When we see our lives as empty and as filled with the grace of God we stop our boasting and our attempts to add anything to the Gospel, to winning God's favor. What more can you get from Him when He has already given you everything? What do you have that you can take credit for, that is not yours by God's grace?

### **Implications and application.**

Think about your thinking and change what you think. Thinking about yourself leads to self-absorption. Stop preaching yourself to yourself. "Why did I do that? Why didn't I do that instead? I have got to do better, be better and try harder."

Start preaching the Gospel to yourself. Of course, you aren't good enough, that's why Jesus came. Jesus came to rescue and save sinners. Jesus is good enough and He makes me good enough to God.

Stop thinking about what you are not and think about what God is and what Christ is and what He has done. Think about your liberty in Christ. Think about God's free grace.

When we stand before God on the judgment day, whose works do you want to set before Him? Your works or Christ's works? Which works do you want to rely on? Whose righteousness do you want to trust in? Yours or Christ's? Rubbish or righteousness? Garbage or grace?