

## **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 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In this series I’m calling “Grace-Robbers” I want to warn you about the dangers of dead, dull, legalism.

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.”

When I was growing up in L.A. (Lower Alabama) we usually had four or five dogs and cats to claim as our pets. By virtue of being the oldest child, my older sister, Judy, demanded the right to name all our pets. (First-born siblings can be control-freaks as the rest of us know). We had a dog that was part German Shepherd which Judy named Rex. While, Rex was a ferocious looking dog, he was a big chicken at heart. He was scared of everything. None of our pets ever came inside; they were “yard pets.” But once when it thundered, Rex was so frightened he broke through the screen door and came in and hid under the table!

His bark wasn’t worst than his bite, because he seldom barked...and he never bit. However, there was on thing that could make Rex bark. Sometimes when a bird or a flock of birds flew over on a sunny day, Rex often chased their shadows on the ground. I can recall watching as one bird flew around in a circle with Rex chasing the circling shadow on the ground, barking the whole time. Poor, dumb, bird-brained Rex—he never figured out 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. In this message, 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. A few days ago, while dining in a friend’s home, we sat at a table with a young man named Seamus from Ireland. He had a delightful Irish accent, and as he answered our questions, we were all enjoying the Irish lilt of his voice. We asked him about his family and he said, “One of me brothers is an engineer, and another brother is taking care of the family farm, and my sister is a vegetarian kook. I was on the verge of blurting, “Yeah, all those vegetarians are kooks!” But in the instant before I stuck my foot in my mouth, I realized he meant “vegetarian COOK.” I wasn’t the only one thought he said “kook” so all we got a big laugh out of it. Later I reminded myself that it’s wrong for me to judge someone just because they are a vegetarian—and vegetarians shouldn’t condemn those of who are carnivorous. 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. 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. As Americans we have become “holidayized!” Congress has officially designated most days of the year as some sort of holiday. For instance did you know that June 8 is “Best Friends Day?” And June 11 is “Hugs Day?” June 15 is national “Fly a Kite Day.” How many of you observed those

holidays? If you didn't, there still time, because next Saturday, June 24, is national “Take Your Dog to Work Day!”

Legalism rears its ugly head when we take our holidays more seriously than the things they are commemorating. For instance, today is Father's Day, and each year I usually get several letters and emails from people saying they were disappointed I didn't preach a Father's Day message. (The complaints triple when I don't preach a Mother's Day message!) Am I intentionally trying to ignore Moms 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.

Holiday legalism can swing both ways. Take Halloween as an example. If you let your kids dress up and trick-or-treat, some people will condemn you and pray for you to get right with God. 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. And I could upset some of you telling you that December 25 really wasn't the actual birth date of Jesus, or that our English word “Easter” comes from Astarte (or 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, too.

### **(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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> Century theocratic American Puritans established laws responsible for many of our false ideas about Sunday. They gave us laws called “Blue Laws” prohibiting certain businesses from opening on Sunday. The term “blue” probably comes from the idea of a strict rigid position (like bluenoses, or bluebloods). Originally, the “blue laws” prohibited a variety of activities in addition to Sunday commerce. Blue laws 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 other terrible sins. By the way, these same Puritans outlawed Christmas observances as well.

The early church worshiped on Sunday, 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; 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 AIDS 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 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?” This attitude is at the heart of what we call our Celebrate Recovery ministry here at Green Acres. It is a support network for people struggling to be set free from the grip of sin.

**(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 counselor, 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 porn, or prescription drugs, or with anger...will you please pray for me?” And the response is not making the sign of the cross. It’s “Yes, I’ll pray for you, and we’ve got a support group for people who struggle with the same thing.”

**(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 I 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. For ladies you may be judged by whether you have on makeup, or excess makeup, or too much gaudy jewelry. And of course, tattoos and piercings aren’t just taboo, they are of the devil. In some churches one of the first questions you have to answer is, “What version of the Bible do you have?” 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 favor, but because you are loved, and you love Him.

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 is that a legalist can *never* live up the standard of keeping all the rules, so they are constantly reminded of what a failure they are.

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! It’s amazing to me that some Christians can keep going to churches where they are beaten up week after week with a reminder of how sinful they are and that all sinners go to hell.

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.

Legalistic churches often teach they have the corner on truth, and that other groups are wrong—and maybe going to hell. Grace-filled churches usually admit they aren’t the only ones going to heaven.

I love the story I heard once about a Baptist preacher who believed Baptists were the only ones who had the truth. He was a guest preacher in a Baptist church once and started his message by saying, “Everyone here who is a Baptist, and proud to be a Baptist, say, ‘Amen!’” There was a thunderous response as everyone said, “AMEN!” Then the preacher said, “Is there anyone here who isn’t a Baptist? Say, ‘Amen.’” From the back of the church came the voice of a teenage boy who offered a timid, “Amen.” The preacher said, “Son, what are you?” The boy said, “Sir, I’m a Methodist.” The preacher thought he would embarrass the boy, so he said, “Son, would you tell everyone here WHY you are a Methodist?” The boys said, “I’m a Methodist because my mother and father were Methodists.” The preacher smiled, because he assumed he could trap the boy in his own words. He said, “Well, son, let me ask you this. If your mother and father had been idiots, what would that make you?” The boy said, “In that case, I guess I’d be a Baptist!”

## CONCLUSION

When you’re outdoors in Texas during the summer, you’d better have a can of OFF or some other insect repellent. If you don’t, those pesky mosquitoes will feed on your flesh. 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, “Pastor 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 repellant, the gospel of grace is like walking through a mall and smelling the fragrance of one of those places that bake fresh cinnamon rolls! 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. Stop chasing the shadows of religious performance and surrender to Jesus who will fill you with His grace!

## OUTLINE

### I. CHEAP SUBSTITUTES FOR GRACE

(1) Dietary Regulations

“Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink”

(2) Religious Holidays

“Do not let anyone judge you with regard to a religious festival, or a New Moon celebration.”

(3) Sabbath Observance

“Do not let anyone judge you with regard to a Sabbath day.”

### II. CONGREGATIONAL SIGNS OF GRACE

#### **Legalism-based**

1. Judgmental, critical
2. Maintain appearances
3. Inter-personal distance
4. External righteousness
5. Underlying depression

#### **Grace-based**

1. Acceptance, desire to help
2. Honesty, transparency
3. Inter-personal closeness
4. Christ's righteousness
5. Release, liberty, joy



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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes