

Freedom versus Legalism: Avoiding Two Extremes

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

— Galatians 5:13

Introduction

The author and poet Oscar Wilde once said, “Everything in moderation, including moderation.” That’s rather a surprising statement coming from such a hedonist as Oscar Wilde, but it’s the thing for which most people strive. We tend to bounce back and forth between emotional extremes, often causing chaos in our lives. Unfortunately, it’s also often true in our spiritual lives. We like to think we are well-balanced, steering right down the middle and not wavering, free from spiritual inconsistencies.

If we’re honest, we know that just isn’t true. On the road of life, we weave back and forth down the road all the time. One moment, we’re angry and judgmental. Next, we are loving and forgiving. We long to somehow ‘lock in’ our thoughts and behaviors and feel confident that we stand approved by God. Sounds very reasonable, but we must do it God’s way, not the way that seems best or easiest to us. There is the right way (God’s way), but too often man tries to outthink God and do it “his way.” If we give in to emotions, we can go too far in opposite directions, both of which are wrong. We either create an excessive set of rules and regulations that cover our behavior, which defines us as ‘holy’ (legalism), or we try to shake off *all* the rules and brag about our ‘freedom’ in Christ (as if His sacrifice covered all our sins *for good* and allowed unrestricted behavior).

For many Christians, this is not a problem. They know grace helps create our love and our works. But for some, there is a great internal spiritual struggle. Either they never gave up their guilt and still feel they must earn grace, or they never really felt that guilty and feel forgiveness allows for careless moral behavior.

Legalism

Legalism: because doing the right thing for the wrong reason just isn’t complicated enough for some people!

Laws and regulations are everywhere in our society. We rely on them to help control and guide almost all aspects of our outward behavior. We agree to this control to help keep order and prevent us from hurting others and being hurt. It limits our freedom but provides a degree of safety—we can all agree to follow the same rules without having to debate every decision. So, why would anyone choose to be legalistic in

their *moral* thinking? Same reasons. It's easy to know exactly what is expected, and it clearly defines the limits of everyone's behavior. That's comforting. It also allows us to immediately judge between two actions and resolve any conflict. That's why officiating in sports is *so important* to fans! Well, we see how well **that** works in most sporting events (no call is *ever* questioned, is it??). If we avoid breaking those rules, we feel we stand in the right, secure from punishment, judgment, and criticism.

We know the necessity of God's grace, but sometimes we worry whether we have done enough good works. It's a normal human reaction when we see how great a sacrifice Jesus made for each of us. "How can I ever repay God?" we think (we *can't*). We can still feel guilt that drives the doubt of our worthiness. "Perhaps if I do more," we think, "He will be happier with me, and I'll be more worthy." That's the great lie that Satan uses frequently on even the "best" Christians. And it works! Although they might even deny it, deep down, many have that nagging feeling that they should be doing more (and perhaps so, but maybe it's a symptom of a different problem, that of a lack of love).

The alternative, relying on our freedom, challenges us to trust that we are secure in Christ and will serve freely out of love – for some, a worrisome test of faith. Should we push ourselves to do more works and be more *worthy* (which is really trying to earn our heavenly reward)? This can make us paranoid about our worthiness, downplay the power of grace, and pressure us toward legalism and Pharisaism. For some, acknowledging the freedom of the gospel feels like "giving in" and risking a slow slide into complacency (which...certainly can happen).

This conflict is exactly what drove the Pharisees to create thousands of spiritual regulations, thinking that if they could define the parameters of *every single human behavior*, they would be in a spiritually "safe" zone and be pleasing to God. Unfortunately, they didn't acknowledge the human capacity to find loopholes and exceptions in practically every law, driven by selfish emotions! They forgot (or didn't care to admit) that most of our behavior and thinking reside in the gray zones between regulations. They also forgot about the burden they dumped on all the other Jewish people in their zeal to regulate morality. No one could perfectly keep all those laws without stumbling in some way. Legalistic religion is just a moral house of cards, ready to fall with just a single misplaced card. What about:

For whoever keeps the whole Law, yet stumbles in one point, has become guilty of all.

— James 2:10

Anyone relying on keeping the Law to be justified is under a curse, because it requires perfect, lifelong obedience (from Deuteronomy 27:26: CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM.)

— Galatians 3:10

...because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

— Romans 3:20

For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh...

— Romans 8:3

To God, religion is more than rules and laws. If His wish is to restore a relationship with us, He first had to create in us a sense of love based on gratitude. As John 4:19 says, *we love Him, because He first loved us.* We can't earn our way back to God and heaven, since we cannot change our sinful nature and erase our past. Our works are the result of love, not necessity and obligation.

The Abuses of Christian Legalism

Although being a little legalistic with scripture may seem harmless at first, it can slowly lead to an inappropriate focus on following the letter of the law and to the eventual worship of the rules rather than the Rule-Giver. Humans are list-makers, and being able to “check the box” can give us a sense of completion and satisfaction. Several hazards are created when we become legalistic in our spiritual thinking and slowly begin to deny of the power of God's grace.

Some of the more severe problems that arise include:

- **Using rules and regulations to exclude others from Christ**, acting as the *gatekeeper* for the church, based on your biblical interpretations, regardless of what Jesus said.
- **Self-reliance** – as we over-stress right deeds, we start relying on our *own abilities* and efforts to supply our confidence in salvation.
- **Using your interpretation of rules to condemn others** – being judgmental, judging others' hearts and souls instead of righteous judgment- can often become *exclusionary*.
- **Picking/choosing which rules to follow** – being *inconsistent* and even *hypocritical* in our beliefs; a combination of overly strict and excessively liberal; this is more common than many realize.
- **Comparing your Christian works to others** - wearing legalism and rule-following like a badge of honor, parading your accomplishments before others to brag and elevate your importance- can cause *pride* and make us believe we are better Christians.
- **Developing spiritual complacency** – if the box is checked, our work is done.
- **Forcing our will on others** – we leave no room for others' beliefs, even if it violates their consciences.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You pay tithes of mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the Law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

— Matthew 23:23

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other...'

Freedom

Grace is not a license, so don't treat it like a fake ID!

Freedom in Christ is designed to let us attain our true spiritual potential when not restrained by the worry of legalistically following rules and regulations. This is not limitless, however. Perhaps you remember the popular Eagles song “Desperado.” One line from that song states, “and freedom, oh freedom... well, that's just some people talkin'...” The inference is that being truly free is just a concept, not a reality. So true in this world. In Matthew 11:28-30, we read: *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

Jesus doesn't add, “if you *find* yourself being a slave...” - slavery to some master is already *assumed*. We are free to make choices, but our choices are limited. And we are never free from the consequences of our actions. Even our government doesn't grant true freedom – just the right to make limited personal choices and exercise them without persecution. Complete freedom to do anything is called **anarchy**, and our country doesn't operate that way. Neither does the universe. And certainly not God. We must operate within the boundaries of our existence.

Why Free Will?

Free will was given to man to allow for the basic choice of serving God or serving self. Men have taken the privilege of serving self to the extreme, following whatever desire gives them their greatest satisfaction and pleasure in this world. That impulse is destructive and turns to sin. However, it's a great gift if we serve the right Master. Jesus asks us to make a choice:

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other...

— Matthew 6:24

We find that man first comes before Jesus already yoked to mortality and sin. The weight of our sin, guilt, and loneliness crushes our souls and isolates us from God. Jesus' sacrifice is not an offer to remove all burdens and work, but to give man a yoke that fits well, is light and easy to carry, and allows him to properly fulfill his true purpose in life. This is what God intended from the beginning. This message is clearly spelled out in scripture:

But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.

— Romans 6:22

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners...

— **Isaiah 61:1**

For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

— **Colossians 1:13-14**

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

— **Galatians 5:1**

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

— **I Corinthians 3:17**

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

— **John 8:31-32**

The Abuses of Excessive Exercise of Freedom

- **Taking God for Granted** – twisting the words of the gospel and nullifying Jesus' sacrifice (read Hebrews 10:26-31). When did your wisdom become stronger than God's grace?
- **A License to Sin** – serving self at the expense of serving God (Galatians 5:13); guess who always gets the lion's share?
- **Ineffective Service** – your "truth" rings hollow; you are compromising both the church and the world
- **Tempting the Weak** – a bad example and damaging to other brothers and sisters, especially those who are struggling spiritually
- **Spiritual anarchy** – Jude vs 1 and 4 spell out the disaster these people can cause: *For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ... these are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted...*
- **Becoming prideful** – we compare ourselves to others, feeling we are a 'higher rank' of Christian, sometimes not even bound by the same rules
- **Developing Spiritual Complacency** – some feel that if the slate is wiped clean, there is nothing more for you to do or worry about – sin is a past concept for you

- **Forcing our will on others** - we leave no room or tolerance for the beliefs of others, even if it violates their consciences

Did you notice the last 3 problems on both the above lists of abuses? **They are the same.** Both excessive reliance on legalistic behavior and excessive bragging about/acting on your Christian freedom force you to arrive at the same tragic state.

Freedom in Christ was meant to allow us to do right and choose to be righteous before God. It was never a green light to avoid all rules and restraints. It does not allow you to move forward strictly by your own spiritual strength. You are never completely safe from sin by yourself, as you are a flawed and weak human being with free will. Remember Peter's warning (I Peter 5:8): *Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.* Jesus will never let go of you, but you can let go of Him.

Conclusion

When Jesus was asked to quote the greatest commandment, He responded:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

– **Matthew 22:37-40**

How can *everything* we do or think possibly be boiled down to just two simple commandments? The answer is that our righteousness is not based on following laws and commands, but on the heart. Our freedom in Christ removes the hindrances of guilt and competitiveness, freeing us to fully serve in love. We can finally find that true balance in our faith that drives us forward in love for God. Rules and commands are important to keep us grounded. They help us, but the heart truly grounded in Jesus knows exactly what to do between those rules and regulations...and wants to do it!

Memory Verse

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

– Galatians 5:1

For Discussion

1. What does a legalistic attitude say about one's heart?

2. How can we avoid the temptation to develop a legalistic attitude in Christ?

3. What attitudes/ behaviors have you seen in Christians who are putting too much reliance in their accomplishments?

4. Do you see evidence of creeping moral ambiguity in the church today?

5. Have you ever met a person who was morally “loose” because of their claimed “freedom” in Christ?

6. Is it possible to be too morally relativistic and too legalistic at the same time?

7. When we develop these attitudes and behaviors, what does this say about our trust in God?