

Does Grace Enable?

Matt Chandler

Just moments ago, she had enjoyed all the thrills of sleeping with a man she shouldn't have. And only a short time later, she stood naked and beaten before a group of men in the temple—of all places. A thousand thoughts raced through her mind. She wanted so badly to be clothed, to get out of there, and to turn back time. Thoughts of the disgrace and embarrassment that her family would own because of her actions haunted her.

The men around her began asking questions to a well-known, if not famous, Rabbi, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now, in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such a woman. So what do you say?" When she heard this question, the thought of dying on that very day overwhelmed her so much that she began to sob out loud. She knew the Law. It was sacred and holy. She knew she had to face death for her actions—to not do so would break the very Law these men were commanded to enforce. She knew her fate and threw herself down on the ground waiting for the Rabbi's command. But he said nothing. The crowd grew irritated and began asking repeatedly the same question, increasing their volume. But, still he said nothing.

She wanted to know what was happening and what the outcome would be as fear and shame raced through her. It seemed like eternity, and all the while she was waiting for the first stone to come flying out of nowhere and hit her. She just wanted it all to be over. How could it have come to this? She had betrayed her God, her family, and her husband. Sorrow finally overcame her and all that flowed through her mind were the words, "I'm sorry"—over and over again.

Finally the Rabbi said, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw the stone at her." The next thing she heard were stones hitting the ground one-by-one. She looked up and saw only the Rabbi there. He asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She lowered her head and immediately began to weep uncontrollably. Suddenly, she felt a hand on her head and a blanket cover her bare shoulders. She didn't want to have to raise her head to look the Rabbi in the face. Although the threat of death was gone, shame and guilt were as present as they had ever been. She started to wish they would have killed her anyway.

The Rabbi called to her again, "Woman, where are they? Has not one of them condemned you?" Through her tears, she answered, "No one, Lord."

The Rabbi gently lifted her head up with his hand. As her eyes met his, a strange quiet fell over her entire being. And for a few moments, he stared into her soul. Then he said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

In a recent Q&A session during the Membership Class here at

the Village, I was asked if there were any concerns about the theology in our church or if truth was being applied incorrectly. I thought for a few moments and answered with one major area of concern: the flow of obedience that comes from having grace take hold of you or the absence of that obedience. It has been my experience that where grace is unapologetically taught, there is also a sinful residue that almost always accompanies it. People can easily grab hold of the concept of grace, but any call to "obedience" is labeled as "legalism" that is contrary to the gospel. It's like they either forget or don't acknowledge the part where Jesus said to the adulteress, "go, and from now on sin no more."

In grace-driven churches, legalism is not tolerable. Call us anything else you want, but to call us "legalistic" is the Mother of all insults. It's like saying something derogatory about our spouses, children, or mothers, and it's unacceptable. As a matter of fact, it might even get you punched in the face (which is okay because God's grace will cover our actions, right?). In churches where grace is the central focus, there seems to be reluctant attitudes toward obedience or commandments. The interesting thing about all of this is that Jesus wasn't reluctant to talk about obedience or commandments then, and He isn't today either. If commanding obedience is legalism, then the author of the grace we teach is the biggest "legalist" of us all.

John 14:15 says, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." Profession and belief alone is not evidence of your love for Christ. The Scripture says that even the demons believe that Jesus is the Christ and they shudder, which is more than most of us do, at the thought of the incarnation. So mere belief is inadequate according to Jesus.

Instead, Jesus says that if you love Him, then you will obey His commands. Is this just one obscure passage dealing with this issue? Not at all.

John 15:10-11 says, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full." There are a few things that should be clear to you thus far: Jesus had no problem giving commandments; Jesus had no problem affirming existing laws; and Jesus had no problem asking us to obey God's commandments. To Him, there was no conflict or tension between love, grace, and obedience. First John 2:3-6 says, "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked." According to this text, is it an option whether or not to keep

God's commandments? Look at the verse again. No—it isn't. What a strong statement! A brother or sister who does not walk in God's commandments is not really a brother or sister.

Here is another passage, from Psalm 40:8, but this is later quoted in Hebrews 10:5-9. The reference in Hebrews makes it clear that when the Psalmist wrote this, it was a prophecy of Jesus Christ. In fact, it was the Messiah saying these words. So, although this passage appears first in the book of Psalms, this is the very heart of Jesus. This is what Jesus said, I delight to do Thy will, O my God; Thy law is within my heart. Jesus didn't say, "Your law is my enemy, O God," "I run away from Your law," or "I am ashamed of Your law." He said that God's law burned within His being and He desired to obey it.

One problem is that we do not have a working definition "legalism." This very topic comes up many times in The Village home groups, over coffee, and at the gym. But, I have never heard anyone define it. We often just throw "legalism" into a theological junk drawer along with other things that convict us or people's lives that challenge us.

The truth is no action can be called legalistic in itself. Is it legalistic to obey God's commands—even the small ones? Of course not. Is it legalistic to preach and teach people to obey the commands of Christ? On the contrary—we are commanded to do so.

How about confronting, rebuking, or disciplining our fellow believers if they are unrepentant in their disobedience? Again, we are commanded by God to do these exact things. Legalism is not an action, it is a motive. It's why we do things that can make the action wrong. It's the trap legalistic people fall into of trying to earn love already given to them or trying to pay back God for mistakes and sins. Both of these motives produce "good works" based off of wrong motives. In the end, they destroy one's understanding of God and grace, and make his or her ability to extend grace nearly impossible. The bottom line is—we do not keep God's commands in order to improve our relationships with God, to win His love, or to receive more of His love. Think back on John 8 for evidence of this. What did the woman caught in adultery do to receive the grace and forgiveness of Jesus? When the story begins, she was caught in the act of sin. She wasn't suspected of it—she was actually found guilty of it. Yet before she obeyed even one of God's commands, she was forgiven. Love was extended to her before she even confessed, made things right with her husband, went to church, or memorized any Scripture. How is this possible? The only answer is that God's love for her was not rooted in her actions but in the soon-to-be death of Jesus on the cross.

This leads to the issue of "right motives." What do you think she felt in that moment—the moment where undeserved love, forgiveness, and grace were extended to her? Do you think she was thinking about going back to what she was doing before? Surely not. I have found that there is a difference between you grasping the concept of grace and grace grasping you. When the reality and truth of grace captures your heart, when it's your turn to stand naked and beaten before all, guilty, and deserving of death, and when you hear the words "neither do I condemn you,"

then in that moment all the right motives for obedience are born.

There are at least three motives. The first is gratitude. We obey the commands of God because our hearts overflow with gratefulness that was birthed in the grace extended to us. And we want to obey Him—not to earn His love—but because He gave His love to us freely. We obey not to pay back but because we owe nothing. Keeping God's commands as an expression of love is the second motive for obedience. It brings us pleasure to obey God because we love Him. Think of being in love. I love my wife, Lauren, very much. And because I love her, I like doing things that make her happy—even if I don't necessarily like the actual things I must do. A few examples would be watching romantic comedies or cleaning the kitchen. However, I don't mind doing those things, because they make my Love happy and therefore bring me joy.

The third motive is obedience as an act of devotion. This motive can't be separated from the first two, or it becomes begrudging submission. And begrudgingly submitting to someone is very different from obeying as an act of devotion because the latter is loyalty birthed out of grateful love. I am not devoted for devotion's sake. I am devoted to obey the commands of God because He has written them on my heart, because I am thankful for those commands, because I'm in love with Him for giving them to me, and because of who He is.

So the remaining question is: what do we do if our motives are wrong, our hearts are not grateful, and we are not in love? I don't think there is a silver bullet here, but there are definitely some things we can do that can help. Meditating on Scripture can penetrate any funk that we find ourselves in because God's Word is "living and active." I am not saying that simply reading the Bible is the answer. But prayerful meditation over the inspiration found in God's Word is. Try reading the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8. Read it slow. Imagine the smells and the emotions that she must have felt. You've already read a piece of the story in the first two paragraphs. But put yourself in her place. Imagine your sins going public and the "neither do I condemn" being extended to you. Read the story of the woman at the well in John 4. Read Romans 5-6. Read Galatians 2:20-3:5. Read each of these passages slowly and pray, think, and answer Jesus' question, "Has no one condemned you?" Then think upon His statement "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." May the Lord be gracious to us and may that grace lead us to obedience to Him so that our joy and His glory maybe full.