

When Grace Exposes Legalism

Breaking the Bonds of Legalism

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For those of you that are joining us as visitors for the first time, we want to welcome you. We have done a series on the whole topic of legalism in the Christian life. Today is the final message in that series.

One of the things that we said is the foundation for the whole topic of legalism is to realize that God saves people apart from their merit. He saves people apart from what they deserve. We do not enter into a relationship with Christ, we do not find ourselves in the presence of God based on our performance because our performance has failed. Our lives are a spiritual failure before God because we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and the reason that anyone is saved is through the love and the grace and the mercy and the patience and the goodness of God as he revealed it at the cross of Calvary and it is in those marvelous wonderful aspects of the good attributes of God that he saves anyone. He saved us in grace. Ephesians 2:8 and 9 says that it is "by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." And that is the principle upon which one enters into the kingdom of heaven. And a legalist, as we have said, there are those forms of legalism that think that a man can earn his way into heaven, that he can earn his salvation through his good works. It is easily diagnosed in the heart of a man when he says, he answers the question why do you think you should go to heaven, he says, "I think I've been a pretty good person. I'm not as bad as the next guy. I'm not as bad as Hitler." You know, they always go to the most extreme form and that's the mark of a legalistic heart that does not understand salvation, and if you're here today thinking that you're a pretty good person and on that basis God would receive you into heaven, it's my privilege to tell you that you you're not a Christian at all because that is not what it means to be a Christian. That is not the basis upon which God receives anyone into his kingdom. God receives only those who acknowledge their sin and come to him by asking for mercy in Jesus Christ on the basis of the work of Christ on the cross where he laid down his life to pay in full the penalty of sin. So there is that aspect of legalism. We are not saved by anything that we do. Neither you nor I are good enough to go to heaven on our own.

Now salvation, then, is a gracious act by God. It is not an achievement by us. No one deserves to be saved. It is a gift from God based on Christ's righteousness alone. Now, my friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, every true Christian has some basic comprehension of that at least. There is at least some basic acknowledgment in the heart

of a true Christian that, "I am guilty. Christ somehow dealt with my guilt at the cross and I am trusting him for my access to God and trusting him alone." Every Christian has some basic comprehension of that. To say it another way, if you don't have some basic idea of something of those basic general principles, again I tell you, you're not a Christian as you sit here right now and I say that not to condemn you but to inform you and to awaken you to what the truth is. Scripture is very clear that there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. That is Acts 4:12. Only in Christ can anyone be saved. Now we've dealt with that earlier in the series. We'll leave that there for now.

So let's come into the realm of Christian thought. We understand that we're saved by grace. The challenge for us is as every Christian, for every Christian is this, is that while we would rest our eternal salvation on Christ and by faith in Christ alone, while we would understand those things, there is still the reality that there are legalistic weeds in our garden and that's what we've been trying to deal with in this series, is to recognize that even as Christians we are still at the hand of mercy. We still need mercy from God, that God is not under obligation to us by anything that we do.

The last two weeks we've done a pair of messages called "Good But Not That Good," and what we mean by that is this, in Ephesians 2:10, it goes on to say that, "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." Part of the reason that God saves you is that you would walk in a life of obedience to him; that you would bring forth a life of good works as a result. God saves you to change you so that you would live a life that glorifies him by your obedience. It's amazing that some people think that they glorify God as so-called Christians by their disobedience and therefore they can sin freely and still have the grace of God. That's not true. That's the error of antinomianism, an idea that obedience does not matter. We dealt with that in this series as well, but what we said is that while we do good works, while we seek to do good works, we recognize that our good works still aren't good enough to accomplish a relationship with God apart from Christ. Our good works, we said, are not good enough to pay for one single sin. It's not that you can sin and then offset it by doing something good. It doesn't work that way, and we said other things about that topic as well. You can go back and listen to the messages, trying to get us to the point where we realize that there is nothing good that we could do that deserves anything from God.

There is nothing that we could do in time that would merit eternal blessing from God. That's foolishness. The reward that God gives to his people is utterly disproportionate, far beyond in its measure of goodness to anything that we do on earth. Our good works don't pay for sin. Our good works also we need to think about it this way, is that as we perform works, as we do good works as finite creatures, there is nothing that we do that adds anything to God and gives him something that he didn't already have. He is perfect in his essence. There is nothing that we could do to make him better or to give him something that he doesn't already have, and it is so important for us to understand these things so that we have our good works in perspective. We realize that even as we are doing our best to live as obedient Christians and we are obeying God's word in response to our

salvation, even in that we are not adding any kind of merit to our account. We are not putting God under obligation to us. We cannot make God our debtor and that's kind of what brings us here today to our final message.

I think we've dealt with this so that if you've been with us sufficiently, you have a grasp of that, though there are many other things that others could say better about legalism than I have, but here's the thing for today: lurking in our imperfect hearts, lurking in our imperfect worldview is often something that can be devastating to Christian life, can be devastating to a man in ministry, can be devastating to a church body and the life of a church if these things are not understood. Often lurking in our worldview is an unrecognized assumption that we make, an unrecognized presupposition that we might deny in theory but hold in our hearts as an expectation out of life and an expectation from God, an expectation that God still owes us favor based on our behavior, that God owes me as a result of the way that I'm living, and sometimes it takes something to expose that to us and we're going to look at God's word to let a couple of things expose it to us here. Think about it this way: a man could look outwardly healthy, he could feel healthy within himself and yet be carrying around an undiagnosed disease. X-rays and other kinds of tests expose health issues that are previously undiagnosed because they show something that the man did not see with his own eyes or feel in his own body but added technology shows something and exposes something that was actually a threat to his health that he previously didn't know. In a like manner, beloved, in a like manner we can be walking through our Christian lives not realizing that there are subtle expectations and wrong presuppositions in our lives that are governing our thinking and only when something happens externally does it get exposed. So what we want to do today is answer this question: what is it that might expose legalism in your heart that you previously didn't recognize? How could it be that we might recognize that we have these legalistic tendencies in our thinking and in our expectations even though we acknowledge and affirm everything that I said earlier here this morning? What might expose legalism in your life and this might be painful for some of us but if it's painful, it's only because the boil of our soul is being lanced so that it can be removed from our heart, and I'm afraid that there are going to be things that we can all relate to to one degree or another.

First of all, what might expose legalism in your life? It's when you have a heart response like this, first of all: it's when you have resentment when God chose grace to someone else. When you show resentment, when you feel resentment when God shows grace to someone else. Turn in your Bibles to the Gospel of Luke 15. You'll see an example of this in the parable of the prodigal son and we'll try to both explain the text and apply it here this morning. When you see good things happen to somebody who does not deserve them, how do you respond? How do you feel about that in your heart, especially if you're going through a bit of a hard time yourself, you're going through a struggle, you're trying to live this godly life, you're trying to bring forth good fruit as a result of being a Christian and yet you are struggling, you are having a hard time in business, in life, in family relationships, in your marriage, and you say, "I'm doing everything I can here and I'm struggling but I'm still trusting the Lord here." Then along comes somebody who hasn't been trying to do that, who has not been living for Christ and all of a sudden you find God pouring out his grace upon them, what is your inner response? How do you feel

about that in response? Well, let's take a look at Luke 15 and let God's word help us here, understanding as we dive into the text here that the whole purpose here is to help us all grow in our spiritual lives, to help us be more grace-filled Christians and with that goal being the goal of the Holy Spirit in our sanctification that we would better reflect the image of Christ in our lives, with the goal that we would be purged of evil tendencies in our heart, then we should all have a sense that, "I want to receive this even if it stings." That's the idea.

Luke 15:11. You know the story very well.

11 [Jesus] said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.

So the son here, this prodigal, had squandered his inheritance in sinful living. No one could be a greater picture of deserving nothing than this son who basically told his father, "I wish you were dead because if you were dead I could get the money. Give me the money now. Give me my inheritance now. I want it for myself." It shows this alienation and this hostility and this disregard to his father and in utter selfishness goes out on his own and he squanders it all, and then he hits bottom and he decides that he'll return to his father. Verse 17,

17 "But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.'"

So he goes back to his father, going back with this attitude that he's going to humble himself and just lay himself at his father's feet and become a servant to his father, at least in that condition he would be better off than being a hungry slave wanting to eat pig slop in order to satisfy the needs of his body. Well, you know the story. This is one of the great pictures of the grace of God in all of Scripture. The father runs to embrace him. Verse 20,

20 "So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your

son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate.

Listen, from a human perspective, from a works-based legalistic mindset, no one was less deserving of this kindness from his father than this prodigal son. He had wished his father dead. He had taken his father's estate and gone and squandered it and now after he had lost everything and blown through it all and all of that wealth had been squandered and wasted and could not be recovered, now he comes back to his father and says, "I'm not worthy. Please receive me." A picture of a sinner recognizing, convicted of sin and coming to God for grace and acknowledging that he has no merit of his own. This is everything that we have been saying. This is everything that has been at stake in what we have been talking about over this series over the past five weeks.

Now, from a human perspective and from the mind of the legalist, the father should have said, "No," or put him on a period of probation with his arms folded across his chest saying, "Well, let's give this a trial run and we'll see how it works out. And what do you have to say for yourself now?" That wasn't the attitude of the father at all. He receives him as a son. He lavishes him with privilege. That by his own admission, the prodigal son absolutely did not deserve. Beloved, this is a picture of that moment that God saves a sinner. Guilty, vile, wretched, rebellious, and God justifying him not because he deserved it, not because he had improved his behavior, at the very bottom of the pit the Father's compassion reaches down and saves him and says, "I will adopt. I will bring you back. I will receive you. All that is mine, I restore to you." This is what God does for sinners who come to him through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He adopts them into his family. He bestows riches upon riches upon them that they absolutely do not deserve. Scripture says in Romans 4:5, God justifies the ungodly. He justifies those who come as beggars, spiritually bankrupt in spirit, having nothing to offer to him. That is the only grounds upon which you come to Christ as one who disclaims any merit and who fully acknowledges a lack of worth.

Well, that's what this son did and we see the festive way in which God receives him. We see a declaration of the full, glad, unreserved grace and kindness of God on sinners displayed in the way that he receives his son. He brought out the best robe, killed the fattened calf and there was a feast. You know, Scripture says elsewhere that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who need no repentance. God delights in saving sinners. God delights in showing undeserved mercy on those come to him in Christ. This is the spirit of God. This is a picture of grace, undeserved favor welcoming the sinner back not because he deserves it but because it is the character of God to receive in such a way, and I'm glad, aren't you, that he's like that?

When I came to Christ and called out for mercy, never was it clearer in my life that I had no claim on mercy, I had no claim on the goodness of God. "God, my sin is right in my face. I feel the righteous weight of eternal judgment being deserved by my guilty soul.

God, have mercy on me, the sinner. God, Christ, come and save me. Christ, come and receive me." And that unreserved confession of sin is the mark of conversion. That unqualified request, "God, receive me by mercy alone, in Christ alone," is the mark of true conversion and what we see is that God delights in that.

You know, it's when you really feel your weight of sin that you are most qualified to go to God for forgiveness. Forgiveness is not offered to those who have somehow stepped up and improved themselves. Forgiveness is offered on the basis of a sheer confession of sin that asks for mercy, a repentant reaching out to God in faith. Not from any life deserving, not because of any goodness in us does God receive us. He hears simply that cry for mercy from the one who knows he doesn't deserve it. So you can see where self-righteousness locks the door of heaven to people. As long as someone wants to cling to the idea, "I'm a pretty good person," they are casting away from them the only key that can unlock the door to heaven because Christ said, "I did not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners. If you're healthy, you don't need a doctor. If you say you're righteous, you don't need a Savior." Wow. This slices to the very core of what a man thinks about himself and what he thinks about God, doesn't it?

Well, we see the father showing this grace on this prodigal, recognizing that even on a human level maybe the story offends some of our sensibilities about right and wrong. Why would he do that? Shouldn't the son have to pay a debt first? Shouldn't he have to grovel at his feet? Shouldn't he have to at least sleep with the slaves overnight after all that he's done? Well, to the extent that we have that reaction to the parable, we are missing the point. We don't understand grace. We don't understand the free way that God bestows grace on sinners if we object, and you can see this in the text. There was someone lurking in the background as these festivities were developing who happened to agree with what the prodigal son said when the prodigal said, "I've sinned against heaven. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son." There is someone in the story who agrees with him on that very point and it's his older brother.

Verse 25, look at it with me.

25 "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he summoned one of the servants [you can see him beckoning with his finger almost, "Hey, come here. I want to talk to you privately, quietly."] Summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. ["What's going on here, man? Why the party? No one told me there was a party going on. I've been out in the field. I've been working. What's this all about?"] 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.'

Now, beloved, listen to me. The one who is wired by grace and the one who is wired into what pleases his Father, would rejoice. "You mean my father is happy? Thank God. I love my father. I'm so glad that he's rejoicing. And my brother has come back after abandoning his life for this destitution of sin and prostitution that he pursued? My

brother's back? Oh, let me join the party!" That would be the response of grace. Legalism, however, responds differently and make no mistake, this second brother was a legalist.

Look at verse 28,

28 But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. [And this legalistic brother in verse 29] answered and said to his father, 'Look! [There is contempt in his voice for his father.] Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends [I've been here. I've been obedient. I've been faithful and I didn't get anything like this]; 30 but when this son of yours [just dripping with contempt], when this son of yours came [not my brother], this son of yours came who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.'

He's angry. His brother received favors that he believed he deserved. He thought his behavior entitled him to something that was now being denied to him and given to his sinful brother. Beloved, there is something we need to understand right here, right now. This is where it all gets laid out on the table and exposes our legalistic sinful hearts. Nothing that this father did for the prodigal son took anything away from the second son. Everything that he had, all of the privileges that were his as a son, were still his. What he objected to was the fact that his father was showing grace, undeserved favor to the one that he thought didn't deserve anything. Nothing about the father's grace to the prodigal took anything away from the second son. His position was in no way diminished whatsoever by this act of extraordinary kindness from a rejoicing father to his son and that's the point that the father gently tries to make to him and he says in verse 31,

31 "And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

He was lost and has been found. Do you know what was it that brought to the surface the legalism, the resentment, the alienation, the hostility that was in this second son's heart all along? What brought it along was seeing grace being displayed to his brother; that there was kindness and benefit and favor being shown to his undeserving brother.

Grace revealed the pre-existing legalism in his own heart. Here was his operating presumption, beloved, his operating presumption was that only the deserving should receive kindness. Only those who earn it, only those who have played by the rules should get something like that. He resented it even though he himself lost nothing in the process. Why are you resentful if you had everything that you had beforehand? Why is that a manifestation of legalism? Beloved, hear me carefully and, look, these are the kinds of things that you don't grasp all in a 50 minute message. These are things that we have to think about and roll over in our mind and consider again and again to get the right

perspective on it for it to sink down where it needs to go. We are tugging at very deeply rooted weeds in some of your hearts and as you know, you go to pull some weeds up and it just snaps at the top but the root is still there. We have to dig this out and we dig it out by a thorough-going repetitive consideration of what's at hand.

The older brother soured on his father because he wanted reward for his perceived merit. He was not content with what the father had given him. He was not content for the father to say, "All that I have is yours, my son." He wanted something more. He wanted more recognition. He wanted another token. He wanted more than what had already been given to him and by his actions he said, "I not only want it, it should be mine. I deserve this." The older son was a hypocrite. He had been going through the motions without even a basic affection for his father. How else can you explain, my friends, how else can you explain that he would so quickly and immediately turn against his father? He wasn't affectionate and compliant and eager to enjoy his father's fellowship and then suddenly this happened completely contrary to his character. He responded this way because that's what was in his heart all along. He was physically close to his father but he had no affection for him. You can see his lack of love for his father because he did not share his father's joy in his brother's return. What is love? What does love do except that it rejoices with those who rejoice? "Father, I didn't see this coming but you're happy, then I'm happy too. As long as you're happy, father, I'm happy. Does it please you, my father, to show this unmeasured kindness to my brother? Then I'm happy. As long as you are pleased, as long as you are joyful, it gives my heart joy to see you joyful, my father." That's what he should have said but he was a legalist and he resented the fact that grace was given to someone and thought that he deserved it on the basis of his behavior.

You can see this in another place in Scripture. Turn over to Matthew 20. You may remember this parable of the vineyard workers. This landowner hired out some day laborers at the beginning of the day and he promised them a day's wage for a day's work and they agreed to that and they go out and they start working. Well, the day goes on, hours go by, he finds others who need work and he hires them too. They're not working as long as the others but he hires them and they do their work, and as you know the story in Matthew 20, let's look at verse 8,

8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.'

So he's going to start with those who did the least amount of work, pay them and then work his way back to the ones he hired at the beginning of the day. Verse 9,

9 When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius.

A day's wage for a day's pay. It was the same wage that had been promised to the workers who worked all day. The eleventh hour came, they got a denarius. Verse 10,

10 When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, 12 saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.'

"What do you think you are doing?" Now, remember who they're talking to. They're talking to the landowner. It's his field. It's his money. It's his wages and they are telling him, they are accusing him of being unfair and unrighteous by the fact that he gave a full day's wage to those who only worked an hour.

The landowner has to respond to them. Verse 13, he does just that.

13 But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what is yours and go,

He reminds them of the fact, "Listen, you agreed to work for a day's wage. I've given you a day's wage. How have you been wronged by me? I have given you exactly and everything that I promised you at the start. You've suffered no wrong. I've not broken my word to you." So he says in verse 14,

14 'Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' 16 So the last shall be first, and the first last."

He says, "There's no problem here with me. I have complete freedom to do what I want with mine. What belongs to me, if I want to give a day's wage to a guy that's only worked an hour, that's none of your concern. That's up to me. That's my prerogative. It's my privilege as the sovereign owner of this piece of land and the sovereign owner of my wealth. So I give to this man like I want. There is nothing wrong here with me, what's wrong is the fact that you have envy and jealousy in your heart. You want what you're not entitled to. You want what does not belong to you. You are demanding that which is not yours to request."

Beloved, Jesus here is not talking about labor relations, is he? He's talking about the way that we think about God, the way that we think about his grace, the way that we respond when we see him being gracious to others. This had a great message for the Jews of the day and was preparatory to the extension of salvation to the Gentiles. We'll save that discussion for another time. Here's the point for us today in the context of our closing sermon on legalism. Beloved, hear it well. Hear it well: God can show mercy to whom he wishes, how he wishes. If God shows grace and favor to someone who doesn't seem to deserve it, that's his prerogative. He is not restricted by the selfishness and envy in our own hearts toward what he does. And beloved, when you really understand grace, when you really understand that you came as an unworthy sinner to Christ, when you

remember that you came to Christ as one deserving eternal judgment, deserving nothing but God's condemnation, and in that condition God saved you, received you into his family, set you on a course that leads to heaven, forgave all of your sins, said, "I'll remember your sins no more; as far as the east is from the west, so far have I removed your transgressions from you," and you remember that God has dealt with you on that basis, understand, go back to the very beginning and say, "I never deserved anything from God and look at all that he has given to me." And from that perspective, you look over and say, "Oh, someone else is being even more favored by God? Well, praise the Lord if that makes the Father happy. I still have everything that he's given to me and everything that he gave to me, I didn't deserve, and everything I deserved, he spared me from." Grace is given at the pleasure of God and is not subject to our critique and this affects the way that we view God's work in the lives of others.

Sinclair Ferguson said this and I'm going to quote him twice here this morning. Sinclair Ferguson said this and, beloved, listen to me, please. If I was wiser, I'd quote Sinclair Ferguson more often. He said this, quote, "Sometimes legalism manifests itself in our service to God. Others with lesser gifts, shorter experience, poorer preparation, are given positions in the church and we are passed over. We are irked. We are not legalistic." Continuing the quote, "But to the contrary, what is irking us is the grace of God because deep down we still think that grace should always operate on the principle of merit as a reward for prior faithful service, or at least a recognition of prior faithful service. Every form of jealousy, all coveting for one's self of what God has given to others, all seeing God's distribution of gifts as related to performance rather than his Fatherly pleasure and enjoyment, is infected with this kind of legalism."

Wow. The truth of the matter is that the first people that need to hear this are men in ministry who view ministry as a competition. "Well, why does he have the bigger church? He's a younger guy. He's got lesser skills. Why is his church bigger?" Men in ministry need to hear this as much as men in the pew but what's at stake here is something enormous of great consequence, what's at stake here is the fundamental way that we think about the way that God deals with men and if God chooses to be gracious to a man who has lived a profligate sinful life and he saves him and brings him into Christ and elevates him to a position of stature in godliness, then it's ours to say, "Amen. Praise God for his grace." Rather than to say, "I've done more than that person did and I got less. That ain't fair. God ain't righteous. This isn't the way it should be done." No.

So when you see people having blessing from God, the question is how do you respond. If you resent it and think it's not fair, that some of that should have been spilled over to you, beloved, you've got legalistic weeds in the garden. You need to pull them up by the roots. You need to come back to grace. Beloved, really what you need to do is to repent of that wrong way of thinking about God and thinking that God should do things the way that you think is right rather than rejoicing as he does things that he thinks is right with what is his own. It stings, doesn't it? This hits too close to home. Resentment when God shows grace to others, you haven't lost anything. God has been gracious to you, why are you worked up?

Secondly, you can see this kind of legalism manifesting in another way, it's when you have contempt for others who are in need of grace. These things are kind of related to one another. Let's look at a text from Luke's Gospel, Luke 18 and we'll go through this last one more quickly than the other. Luke 18:9,

9 [Jesus] also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

A dripping pride disguised in the form of prayer. A man congratulating himself in the presence of God, "I'm not like these other people. I thank you that I'm not an adulterer. I thank you that I'm not one who commits fraud. I thank you that I'm not a sinner like all of these homosexuals around me. Praise God for that. I'm not like them." Well, okay, so you haven't committed their sins. Do you know what? They haven't committed your sins. So what's the point of your pride?

Jesus describes someone else on the scene, verse 13,

13 But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'

And the punchline of the parable in verse 14. Everyone who was in the original audience of Jesus would have looked at the Pharisee as being the holy man justified by God. They hated tax collectors. They were cheats. They were frauds. They had suffered at the hands of unscrupulous men like that. They would have looked at that and said, "Sinner to be condemned by God. Pharisee, good behavior, good guy, obviously on good terms with the Father." Jesus turns it upside down. He turns over their expectations like he overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple. Verse 14 he says,

14 I tell you, this man [meaning the tax collector] went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.

You exalt yourself in the presence of God, you take a posture of pride, of achievement, of deserving it in his presence, God won't hear that. People who try to approach him on the basis of their works are turned away. Sometimes it's really religious people who look really good on the outside. What we see, once again, is a man who deserved nothing confessing that and coming to God with a plea for mercy, pleading for God to receive him and accept him on the grounds of mercy alone without any trace of earning it, and Jesus says, "That's the man that God justifies." He justifies the ungodly. He justifies, he receives, he counts as righteous the one who comes admitting that he's not righteous and

trusting in Christ alone. God justified the tax collector and not the Pharisee and it turned all the expectations upside down.

Well, beloved, what if you and I were more like the Pharisee than the tax collector? What if our church was like that? People walk in, "What's he doing here? Look at the way he's dressed. Or I know what that person has done in the past. What's he doing here in church?" That has the ugly roots of legalism wrapped all around a heart that thinks that way, that says such things. Why do any of us deserve to be in the presence of God gathered with his people? Not a one of us does. So if someone comes with perhaps a more outward manifestation of their lack of merit, that doesn't somehow put us above them as if we can look with contempt and say, "He shouldn't be here." No. Not in God's kingdom. Not in God's realm of salvation. We're all undeserving. We all lack merit. Sinclair Ferguson again says this, he says, "The instinct to look down on another person is one of the most obvious telltale signs of a heart from which legalism has not yet been fully or finally banished. It implies that we have merited grace more than another."

How can we summarize all of this? Maybe in the future we'll have the opportunity to come back to this again. I kind of like this topic. I haven't said all that needs to be said but there comes a point where you need to move on. How can we summarize all of this? The true Christian, beloved, and I speak to most of you as brothers and sisters in Christ, but if you are in Christ, you need to understand something very fundamental: no one deserves anything from God. When we claim grace for ourselves but would deny it to others, our lurking legalism is exposed. If you resent it when someone is given blessing that you haven't received, you think, "That's not fair. I should have gotten a piece of that," beloved, legalism has just surfaced in your heart. You need to go back to the beginning, that you were saved only by love, grace, patience, mercy and the goodness of God, and remember that, remember that if somebody at the end of the day receives the same wage as you, God has done you no wrong. God has been good and gracious to you in measures that you can't begin to fathom.

If you resent it when God shows grace to others, you need to be swift to repent, and if you think that there are some who do not deserve grace, you need to repent as well. Those that are behind bars in prison are just as likely candidates for grace as you are and their crimes against society do not cut them off from the grace of God offered freely to all men everywhere throughout the world in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And if there would be a sweeping revival behind the bars of prison walls, we on the outside should just rejoice greatly regardless of their crimes, that it pleased God to show mercy to others who were undeserving just like I am. I just happen to still have my freedom.

God does not measure out grace according to our selfish standards. Let me say that again. Get this, please. For those of you that are visiting, I don't pound the pulpit that often but this is really important. God does not measure out grace according to the way that we think he should do it. He does not save sinners, he does not help and show favor to people in his kingdom according to what we think is the way it ought to be done. He does it according to his wisdom, according to his sovereign prerogative, according to his boundless grace and mercy and you and I as those who belong to Christ, should rejoice in

that, not criticize it, not resent it, not let it turn us into somebody who is jealous and sinful of wanting something that is not ours. Charles Spurgeon said this, he said, "If mercy be the Lord's own, he may give it as he pleases. If the reward of service be wholly of grace, the Lord may render it according to his own pleasure."

Friends, does the sight, does the thought of God's grace bring you joy or expose your legalism?

Let's pray together.

Father, search our hearts. Thank you for grace that you have shown on unworthy sinners like us. Keep the ugly roots of legalism far from our hearts and help us to recognize it when it lurks up that we might be swift to repent. God, be gracious to us all and lead us into your heavenly kingdom. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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