

## Beyond Legalism: Discovering the Power of Grace

Luke 5: 27-39

Encountering Jesus Today

By Dave Urbanski

Pastor Scott this past Sunday led us through another snapshot in our continuing journey in the Gospel of Luke — and this time we tackled the issue of legalism. Legalism — in a broader sense, Law versus Grace — isn't always an easy issue to navigate, as most of us know.

In this account in Luke 5:27-39, we first meet Levi, a Jewish man we know as Matthew who also is a tax collector for the oppressive Roman government. Taking on a job as a tax collector, as you can imagine, didn't win over many friends among Jews at the time. Being a tax collector meant you were betraying your own people — and more than that, tax collectors regularly fleeced the population, collecting higher commissions for themselves. As Pastor Scott noted, Jewish tax collectors for the Roman government often became rich off the backs of their countrymen.

Yet, Jesus called Levi to become a disciple of his. It is an astounding choice — most notably because bringing Levi/Matthew aboard as one of his disciples would anger and confuse most people Jesus wanted to reach.

But how often does Jesus do what we expect?

In the passage we find that Levi/Matthew immediately left everything when Jesus called him. In the infancy of his belief, he threw a party for Jesus, which included the former tax collector's buddies — it was likely a raucous affair that most would have trouble believing Jesus would tolerate. But Jesus attended — and the Pharisees and scribes were not happy.

“Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” They asked Jesus, who replied, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

I've believed in Jesus for a long time, but Pastor Scott pointed out something in Christ's response that apparently for me has been hiding in plain sight.

Jesus offered his self-righteous religious leaders a major zinger, of sorts.

More than likely, the scribes and Pharisees figured they had no need for a savior — after all, they considered themselves “righteous.” Yet the truth of it, as well all know, is that NO ONE is righteous. NO ONE meets God's standards. NO ONE deserves eternal

life based on their own merits. So, Jesus' reference to those who are "well" and don't need a physician proves to carry a ton of irony — to those with ears to hear, at least. As Pastor Scott reminded us, there's a vast difference between a legalism mindset (which the religious leaders in Jesus' time stood for) and a grace mindset (which is what Jesus stands for).

Pastor Scott also offered us a helpful list in this regard:

~ While legalism distorts our relationship with God as a distant taskmaster rather than loving father, Grace lets us approach the Lord as a loving father.

~ While legalism promotes a false sense of righteousness and pride, Grace gives us the opportunity to exude true humility.

~ While legalism neglects the heart, Grace transforms the heart.

~ While legalism is a barrier to Grace as it promotes a "works" mentality as a means of "winning over" God, Grace opens the door to God's blessings as a gift from him.

~ While legalism stifles spiritual growth due to a kind of "checklist mentality" when it comes to standards of behavior, Grace promotes openness to the Holy Spirit, which fosters spiritual growth.

~ While legalism divides the Body of Christ, as those who operate in it impose their own interpretations and biblical standards on others, Grace unites the Body of Christ in a spirit of love and forgiveness.

~ While legalism misses the heart of gospel and its call for unconditional love, Grace embraces the heart, acknowledges sin, and runs toward God's solution for unrighteousness — his only son, Jesus.

Indeed, we know what to discard and what we must tightly embrace.

Jesus, in fact, confronts the legalism of the teachers of the law, who noted to our Lord that "the disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink."

Knowing what this was all about, Jesus led them (and us) through three illustrations:

"And Jesus said to them, 'Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.' He also told them a parable: 'No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, 'The old is good.'" (vv. 34-39)

New garment pieces placed on old garments ... new wine poured into old wineskins ... both are incompatible combinations and will result in a mess, Pastor Scott explained.

Instead we must open up ourselves for the new things the Lord has for us.

What does this mean for us?

Have you ever noticed that you tend to beat yourself up when you fall short of God's standards? That you put yourself down? That means, more than likely, that you're knee-deep in legalism — and are sinking fast. Instead, Pastor Scott told us, we need a heavy dose of God's grace.

But let's not toss out the Law in the process, Pastor Scott told us. As there are benefits that come with Grace, there also are benefits that come from the Law. The following is another helpful list from Pastor Scott that we should earmark.

Benefits of the Law:

- ~ Reveals God's character and righteousness
- ~ Guides our moral and ethical behavior.
- ~ Shows our need for redemption as it exposes humanity's sin
- ~ Preserves order and justice
- ~ Provides structure and guidelines for approaching God
- ~ Promotes holiness and sanctification
- ~ Informs Christian ethics
- ~ Connect the Old and New Testaments
- ~ Teaches respect for God
- ~ Foreshadows Christ as it outlines sacrificial principles

Benefits of Grace:

- ~ Provides freedom from guilt and allows us to experience peace
- ~ Deepens our relationship with God as we experience intimacy with our Creator
- ~ Transforms hearts and lives, empowering us to break free from sin
- ~ Fosters forgiveness and mercy
- ~ Encourages authentic community and an atmosphere of acceptance where we're valued for who you are as opposed to being judged for our past mistakes
- ~ Inspires gratitude and generosity
- ~ Strengthens faith and trust in God
- ~ Encourages risk taking and growth, as we're liberated from fear of failure
- ~ Offers hope and assurance, as we stand before God secure in Jesus' finished work on the cross as opposed to our own efforts, which are worthless as "tickets" to heaven
- ~ Transforms our perspective on life, as see all things through the lens of the Lord's redemption and love and view challenges and hardships as opportunities for growth, hope, and optimism

Pastor Scott noted that we should toss out legalism whenever it threatens to derail us, but we still need both Grace and the Law. One to see where we are and where we are going — and one to see where we came from.

Sure we need to know the Law, as it points our sins when we need them pointed out to us — but let's not live there, Pastor Scott encouraged us.

The Law and Grace don't compete with each other — instead they work together to help us understand God in a greater way.

So, let's live in Grace but still recognize the importance of the law of the Lord.