

The Cure for Discouragement

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We've probably all experienced the discouragement that comes with self-recrimination. We do something wrong and then stew in feelings of guilt. "I'm so nasty," "I'm always doing the wrong thing," "How can God love me?" We respond by either thinking we're a hopeless cause or by setting our will to do better next time. Either way, the entire scenario is carnal rather than spiritual, but it's understandable.

I believe that when we respond this way, it's because of the natural, human preference for law and works over grace. Right from the beginning, people have wanted to have the rules clearly spelled out, to know what is good and what is evil, and then to rely on themselves to succeed in doing the good. Adam and Eve chose law (this is what the knowledge of good and evil is) over grace (eating freely from the tree of life). Every religion except the true religion has been based on human works ever since. Non-religious people have their works and rules, too—the laws of science, the laws of nature, and human works to better themselves and/or others. This tendency toward law and works is so strong that it even finds its way into Christianity, so that much of what is preached from pulpits is not grace alone but, at best, grace plus works. Thus, from our own human tendency plus being conditioned by what we've heard in churches, we tend to look at ourselves in a legalistic way—judging ourselves by our works. Paul speaks of this natural tendency toward law when he speaks of the conscience of the Gentiles who "show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience testifying with them, and their thoughts among themselves accusing or else excusing them" (Romans 2:15). But this is law and works, not grace. Since we all sin and "fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), this way of examining ourselves doesn't bring joy but misery.

Someone from the Bible I always picture with a smile on his face is Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus, the King James Version tells us, "was little of stature" (Luke 19:3). But that didn't stop him from being big on grace. Zacchaeus understood forgiveness. The Jewish leaders looked upon Zacchaeus as a sinner because he was a chief tax collector (verse 2). Yet, when Jesus came to Jericho, He didn't seek out the most perfect keeper of the law. He found Zacchaeus (up a tree because he wanted to see Jesus over the crowd) and told him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house" (verse 5). Imagine

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Zacchaeus's ecstasy: "He hurried, came down, and received him joyfully" (verse 6). I see him with a smile from ear to ear jumping down from that tree and running to his house to receive Jesus. If you are a Christian, Jesus has, in essence, said the same thing to you. He has come to stay at your house. He has come to abide in *you* 24/7. Are you bursting with joy as Zacchaeus was?

When the others heard what Jesus said to the tax collector, "they all murmured, saying, 'He has gone in to lodge with a man who is a sinner'" (verse 7). They were killjoys. Strangely, we can sometimes become our own killjoys, looking to our own performance rather than the wonderful blessings Jesus has given us under the New Covenant. Jesus says of you what he said of Zacchaeus: salvation has come to your house, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus purposely sought you out because you were lost under the curse of the law, and He saved you. Yet, in our human frailty, we have a tendency to forget, to return to a legalist way of thinking, and to condemn ourselves. Under the New Covenant, we have no need to remember our sins. They're gone, taken away by Jesus. Instead, we can remember the righteousness of Jesus Christ that God has imputed to us.

A Reminder of Sin

The Old Covenant was very different. It was a "service of death, written engraved on stones" (2 Corinthians 3:7). God set up the Old Covenant temple system in such a way that it continually reminded the people of their transgressions of the law, their sins, which were never really taken away. "But in those sacrifices there is yearly reminder of sins. For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins... Every priest indeed stands day by day serving and often offering the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins" (Hebrews 10:3-4, 11). The temple rituals also pictured a future when the sins of believers would be taken away once for all time, but that reality would have to wait until the coming of Christ and the New Covenant. God deliberately planned it that way. It was the very nature of the law.

For the law, having a shadow of the good to come, not the very image of the things, can never with the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. Or else wouldn't they have ceased to be offered, because the worshippers, having

been once cleansed, would have had no more consciousness of sins?

Hebrews 10:1-2

Notice the last part of that quote. If the sacrifices could truly have removed sin so that they could stop being offered, the people would have been cleansed of sin and "would have had no more consciousness of sins." They would have ceased to be aware of sins. This never happened under the Old Covenant, which God designed to remind the people of sin, but it is one of the benefits God built into the New Covenant. Under the New Covenant, we are to remember Christ and His sacrifice to take away our sins, and we are to forget our sins. Unfortunately, while we may know that Jesus died for our sins, we often don't fully experience this benefit because we plague ourselves with a consciousness of sins.

A Reminder of Righteousness

As I said earlier, as humans, we naturally want to dwell upon law and our own works. Unfortunately, churches, rather than teaching us how to deal with this tendency reinforce it instead. There is a legalist, Old Covenant mindset that pervades much of the Christianity of the institutional church. It is as if the preacher has set his pulpit on Mount Sinai rather than Mount Zion. Tragically, Christians have come to see Sinai as their standard for behavior and imagine that this is what God wants for them. Contrary to being God's standard for Christians, looking to the law is a denial of the Gospel itself. The law doesn't justify; it tells us of sin: "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). Thus, the law condemns.

Jesus came to save sinners, not condemn them: "For God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through him" (John 3:17). If Jesus didn't come to judge you, why are you judging yourself? If Jesus came to save you, why are you trying to save yourself through your works? You are not supposed to be someone stumbling around trying to keep the law to maintain your righteousness. You are a new creation with Christ's permanent, untarnishable righteousness:

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Behold, all things have become new. But all things are of God, who reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ, and gave to us the

ministry of reconciliation; namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning to them their trespasses, and having committed to us the word of reconciliation. We are therefore ambassadors on behalf of Christ, as though God were entreating by us: we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf; so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

If God is not reckoning our trespasses but He has instead made us the righteousness of God, we are foolish to remember our trespasses, to become discouraged because our works aren't perfect, to look to our works or law-keeping for our righteousness, or to think that Christ began our salvation but we must now keep it up with our works. To rely upon our works of the law is to fall from grace (Galatians 5:4). This doesn't mean that we have lost our salvation, which is sure in Jesus, but that grace and works cannot coexist: "And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work" (Romans 11:6). To rely upon one is to turn from the other. We must examine our hearts to see whether we are pridefully looking to ourselves rather than humbly relying on Christ.

Turning from grace, dwelling on what we did, what we said, and what we thought can become a habit that leads us away from a close relationship with Jesus. It becomes a tool of Satan, a trap the accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:10) uses to keep our minds focused on a knowledge of sin that condemns us rather than the righteousness of Jesus that saves us. Such thinking is founded on Moses (John 5:45; Hebrews 3:1-6) rather than Christ. If we continue living under an Old Covenant mindset, we will live in misery and not experience the benefits Christ procured for us, losing the joy that God wants us to have.

Speaking of the Lord's Supper, Paul said, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). This is a New Covenant ordinance that reminds us that Jesus died for our sins. Under the Old Covenant, God made sure that the people were continually reminded of their sins. Under the New Covenant, God reminds us of our forgiveness. He says, "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness. I will remember their sins and lawless deeds no more" (Hebrews 8:12). Since Jesus has been offered, ending the sacrifices, it must then be that, "having been

once cleansed," we are now to have "no more consciousness of sins" (Hebrews 10:2).

Forget about looking to the table of the law. Even though it was written in God's own hand (Exodus 31:18), He wrote it for another people and another covenant. Jesus nailed it to His cross: "You were dead through your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh. He made you alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, wiping out the handwriting in ordinances which was against us; and he has taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross; having stripped the principalities and the powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it" (Colossians 2:13-15).

The Biblical Solution

How do we deal with our tendency to look to the law and works; to judge ourselves by our performance, which inevitably leads to discouragement? What is the cure? Grace. Grace alone is the cure. Are you a child of God? Then, rather than being ruled by Old Covenant laws, you are led by the Spirit (Romans 8:14). "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.... If we live by the Spirit, let's also walk by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:18, 25).

Trying to live by the law becomes a vicious cycle. The law incites sin, sin causes us to dwell on our guilt under the law, and the law incites more sin: "For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were through the law, worked in our members to bring out fruit to death" (Romans 7:5). But living by the Spirit is entirely different: "But now we have been discharged from the law, having died to that in which we were held; so that we serve in newness of the spirit, and not in oldness of the letter" (verse 6).

This is what Romans 8 is about. I'll quote the first five verses of it here, but you may want to read it all:

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who don't walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death. For what the law couldn't do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God did, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh; that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For those

who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

Romans 8:1-5

When you behave in a way that is unloving toward others, you must not think you have incurred condemnation. And, while reconciling to the offended person is, of course, right, this is not what covers the sin. Jesus' death has already covered it so that it never counted against you. All who trust in Jesus live in a continual state of grace. No self reproach and no resolving or willing ourselves to do better will change that.

Keep in mind that we are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). We won't reach perfection in this life, but the answer to our living as better Christians is not the law and our willpower. It is submitting ourselves to God, letting Him have His will, do His work, in us. God gives grace to the humble. Subjecting ourselves to God is what resists the devil; drawing near to God is what causes the double-minded (those unsettled in their grace who do not receive God's benefits—James 1:8) to experience God's grace. We draw near to God through prayer and the study of His Word. The Bible is the expression of His mind, and the better we know it, the more we have His mind in us and grow in His grace and knowledge (Philippians 2:5; 2 Peter 3:18).

Just as in the case of the Galatians, the Gospel today is being perverted (Galatians 1:7). Pastors have run headlong to "put a yoke on the neck of the disciples" (Acts 15:10). Don't put it on, or, if you have, throw it off (Galatians 5:1-4). Don't live your life under the burden of the law and condemnation.

Even though Jesus knew the Samaritan woman had had five husbands and the man with whom she was living was not her husband, He never condemned her (John 4:7-28). Also, He said to the woman caught in adultery, "Neither do I condemn you" (John 8:11).

Don't mix the Old and New Covenant, law/works with grace. The law is not of faith (Galatians 3:11-12). Jesus Christ has come to your house. He is actually living in you (Romans 8:10; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 4:19; Ephesians 3:17; Colossians 1:27). He's not there to condemn you. He's there because He's already forgiven you. So, don't

condemn yourself. Be like Zacchaeus. Be joyful, and smile. "Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I will say, 'Rejoice!'" (Philippians 4:4).

Having therefore, brothers, boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by the way which he dedicated for us, a new and living way, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having a great priest over the house of God, let's draw near with a true heart in fullness of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and having our body washed with pure water, let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering; for he who promised is faithful.

Hebrews 10:19-23