

**McCabe United Methodist Church**  
**Naked Gospel: Legalism vs. Grace (part 1)**  
**Romans 7:14-25 \* Matthew 22:34-40: January 7 & 8, 2012**  
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This is the first in a series of messages based on Andrew Farley's book called *The Naked Gospel*. It's a series that's designed to challenge us to take a deep, hard look at our faith and in the process and hopefully, discover the persons God wants us to be.

What do you know about *legalism vs. grace*? What's the difference?

Years ago, on a Sunday morning, a pastor found the road leading to his church blocked by snow. He was a creative pastor and so he decided to use the river running by his church and ice skate to his Sunday service. He thought he was being pretty clever.

However, when he arrived at the church, the elders were horrified that their preacher had skated on the Lord's day. Now, this was years ago when some folks considered things like skating work and doing work on a Sunday was not permitted. After the service, the elders of the church held a meeting with the pastor. They demanded to know why their pastor had skated ON THE LORD'S DAY.

The pastor explained that he either skated to church that day or he didn't come at all.

The elders put their heads together. Finally one of them asked the pastor, "**Did you enjoy it?**"

When the preacher answered, "**yes,**" the board decided that skating must be fun and not work and the matter was dropped.

This is legalism at its very best or at its very worst. Legalism can be defined as following rules and laws strictly and literally. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were forced to be legalists. The religious authorities had developed a system of 613 laws that people must follow if they wanted a good relationship with God. They quickly found out that it was an impossible system for them to follow. It didn't matter how hard people tried, they could never obey all the laws and rules like trying to figure out if skating is fun or work.

And so every night, God-fearing Jews went to bed and wondered how of many of these laws they had broken that day. It was impossible for them know just as it was impossible for them to keep the laws. They were tied to a system that said "**you either keep the laws or else!**"

Back in the second century, a young person wanted to attend a religious school. He

asked the question, “**what laws do I have I keep to find God’s favor?**”

The head teacher replied, “**You must get rid of all your colored clothes. Get rid of everything that isn’t white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments and don’t eat any white bread. And oh yeah, stop taking warm baths and shaving your beard.**” And these were just a few of the 613 laws that the student was expected to keep.

Do you see how difficult it was for the people of Israel to be in a right relationship with God? A relationship that depended on their ability to keep all 613 laws and rules?

I believe that this system of laws and rules is alive and well in our Christian faith today and it’s causing many of us to question our relationship with God.

Legalism was a strong part of my faith growing up. It started with the Wesley Methodist Church in Hillsboro. My grandma was the biggest influence when it came to legalism. I may have told you this before, but my Grandma used to warn my brothers and I about what she called, *the five big no-nos!* No playing cards, no smoking, no drinking, no dancing and no going to the movies. These five no-nos were in addition to the original 613 laws developed almost 3,500 years ago. According to my Grandma, these were crucial laws to obey if a person wanted a healthy relationship with God.

Back then, as a kid, I knew I was sunk because I liked playing cards, going to the movies and dancing although I didn’t dance well.

As I grew older, it became harder for me to obey all the rules and laws. It wasn’t simply a matter of giving up certain things like dancing or playing cards or smoking, but, as I grew older, I started worrying about doing certain things. Was I reading the Bible enough? Was I praying enough? Was I helping other people enough? Was I being kind enough? Was I forgiving enough? Was I turning the other cheek enough? These became requirements for me . . . things I had to do. They were all added to the top of my pile and I grew more miserable.

And almost every night, I’d hear the same voice in my head, “**Rick, you just don’t measure up. Rick, you’re a disappointment to God. Rick, you’re just not Christian enough to have a close relationship with God.**”

I’d try and I’d try and I’d try, but instead of growing closer to God, in my religious system based on keeping rules and laws, I was growing further and further away from God.

And so I thought to myself, maybe if I worked harder for God and longer hours and volunteered more, this might bring me closer to God. Or, if I give God more money this might help. Or, if I read the Bible more and pray more, this might be helpful in my relationship with God. But no, it didn’t seem to help.

How about you? Do you ever worry or wonder about your relationship with God? Do you ever worry that you're not good enough for God or you're not worthy? Do you ever worry because you don't read the Bible as much as you should or you don't pray as much as you should or you don't attend church as much as you should or you don't volunteer as much as you should or you don't . . . you can fill in your own blank?

Sadly, all these dos and don'ts are like a brick wall that stands between us and God. Am I making any sense?

Pretty soon, you stop trying to have a better relationship because you figure, **“what's the use? I'll never measure up!”**

When I became an ordained minister, I thought this would surely help me have a better relationship with God. But, it didn't. All it did was to make me aware of more laws and rules that I was breaking. I worked on Sundays. I didn't get along with certain people in my church. I was envious and jealous of other pastors because I thought they prayed better than me or had better churches than mine. I wasn't the best husband in the world or the best father. And all of these things added to the top of the brick wall I was building that was separating God and me.

And so once again, every night, I'd go to bed and I'd think to myself, **“Well, Rick, you did it again. How can God love you, Rick, the way you are? Why can't you be like other people . . . you know, the ones who follow and obey God's laws perfectly?”**

Then, it hit me. I had one of those ah-ha moments. I discovered that no one . . . no one was obeying all the rules and laws. It's impossible. Most of us were picking and choosing which laws to keep and which ones not to keep.

I realized that we were all falling short of the glory of God.

I felt like Paul, in the book of Romans. **“I don't understand what I do. For what I want to do I don't do, but what I hate I do.** -Romans 7:15

Like Paul, I wanted to be a good disciple. I wanted to know God. I wanted to shine in the eyes of God. I wanted God to smile down on me and say, **“Rick, you're doing fine. Keep up the good work.”** But, I kept doing what I shouldn't be doing and not doing what I should.

In a religious sense, I was dying. My legalism was holding me to a religious standard that was impossible to follow. And instead of growing closer to God, I found myself growing apart.

I had a neighbor one time, who owned a big German Shepherd dog named Don. Don was a ferocious looking dog, but he was a big chicken inside. He was scared of everything.

One time, it thundered outside and Don was so scared he broke through the screen door and hid under the table!

Have you ever heard the saying, “**his bark is worse than his bite?**” This was Don. In fact, Don seldom barked at anything except . . . except birds. Whenever birds flew over the yard, Don would start barking. If it was a sunny day, Don would chase their shadows on the ground. If the birds flew in a circle above the yard, poor Don would run around, chasing the shadows, barking the whole time. Don never figured out that the shadows weren’t real.

This was me and maybe it’s you. Chasing shadows. Chasing something we can never, ever accomplish.

The Israelites knew it. The Israelites couldn’t keep their 613 laws. And I’m sure, that every night, they’d crawl into bed and whisper the same prayer, “**Dear Lord, I did it again. I broke the laws. Please forgive me and make tomorrow better. Amen.**”

But, tomorrow would come and the same thing would happen all over again. Their relationship with God depended on their ability to keep all the laws and rules. It was a system that was designed to fail.

Mother Teresa wrestled with the same religious legal system. In one of her letters she wrote, “**I am told that God loves me . . . and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake in surrendering blindly to the call of God?**”

In more than 40 years of service, Mother Teresa touched 1,000s of lives. She reached out to the sick, the homeless and the orphans of her own country and beyond. Yet, she struggled for a better relationship with God. She was bound to a religious code she couldn’t keep.

What about you? Are you close to God or far away? Do you have healthy relationship with God or an unhealthy relationship or no relationship at all? Do you feel like you’re worthy of a relationship with God or not worthy?

What do we do? Paul, in his letter to the Romans, put it this way, “**What a wretched person I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?**”

Next week, we turn to Jesus and what he said about laws and rules. We’ll take a look at his commandment. Do you remember his commandment? Someone once asked him, “**Teacher, what is the greatest commandment?**” This person had in mind one of the 613 laws that filled Israel’s religious law books. What did Jesus say?

Come back next week and hear about something called the ‘*grace of God*’.