

Legalism, License or Grace

If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you have probably had a conversation with someone on obedience to God's Word, the Scriptures. I have personally spoken with someone in my own extended family who said, "I would never be a Christian because of all the rules you are made to follow to be accepted by God." Is following rules the way in which we become Christians? Do we really have to obey the teaching of the Bible to be a Christian? I would like to suggest that there are three ways in which obedience is often thought of.

The first is what is generally called legalism or moralism. A legalist believes that his/her obedience is what makes them acceptable to God. The legalist says, "I deserve all the blessings that I receive, because I obey." The second way in which some people think of obedience to the Scriptures is generally called, "license." License says in effect, "I do not need to worry about obedience because the Bible says that I am saved by grace not by works of obedience." Both legalism and license are wrong and do not correctly represent what the Bible teaches about our salvation and our obedience. Lastly is the biblical teaching of gospel/grace obedience. Someone who is truly a Christian desires—as a pattern of life—to obey their Father in Heaven out of love and gratitude for our salvation as well as for all the blessings He pours out on us daily. Christians are accepted because of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. We have no 'righteousness' of our own that would ever meet the standard of perfection that God requires.

Former missionary and Christian author Elizabeth Elliot in her book entitled, "These Strange Ashes" told a story that is meant to illustrate a life of results-oriented obedience versus a life of faithful obedience born out of a foundation of love and gratitude. Although this is not a biblical story, it does help us to think about our motivation for obedience. The story is told that: "One day Jesus said to his disciples, 'I'd like you to carry a stone for me.' He did not give any explanation so his disciples looked around for a stone to carry. Simon Peter, being the practical sort, sought out the smallest stone he could possibly find. After all, Jesus did not give any regulations for weight and size! After finding a very small stone, Peter put it in his pocket and continued to follow Jesus.

About noontime Jesus had everyone sit down. He waved his hands and all the stones turned into bread. Jesus then said, 'It is time for lunch.' In a few seconds Peter's lunch was over. When lunch was finished Jesus said to the disciples again, 'I'd like you to carry a stone for me.' This time Peter said to himself, 'Aha! Now I get it!' So he looked around and found a huge rock

that he could barely carry. He hoisted it on his back, staggered under the weight and thought, ‘I can hardly wait for supper.’ Around supper time Jesus led the disciples to the side of a river. He said, ‘Now everyone, toss your stones into the water.’ They did. Jesus then said, ‘Follow me.’ Peter looked at Jesus dumbfounded and Jesus said to him, ‘Who were you carrying the stone for, me or for yourself?’”

Jesus does call us to follow him and to be obedient to all of the Scriptures properly motivated by love and thankfulness to God. Christians are saved by grace based on the righteousness of Jesus Christ, not our own. May our obedience—as a pattern of life—be motivated out of love for and thankfulness to God for our gracious salvation as well as everything good that comes into our daily lives.

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.