

## Living By the Rules or By Grace?

### Introduction:

1. LoNita and Jay found themselves arguing one evening in a church meeting. Their argument, though couched in their 21<sup>st</sup> century context, was as old as Scripture itself.
2. LoNita was quite clear what the scriptural rules said. She even quoted what Jesus said and identified the specific passages. She reasoned that the N.T. was God's revelation defining right and wrong. The rules were clear and either you keep them or you don't.
3. Jay also was emphatic. Jesus didn't come to give us a bunch of rules. He taught us to be gracious. He cited what Paul said in Rom. 10:4: "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness." He reasoned that Christ accepted tax-collectors and sinners and condemned the self-righteous Pharisees. Jay said people need to be honest and authentic and acknowledge their inability rather than depending on their rule keeping.
4. Jay never came right out and said that LoNita was a hypocrite, but it was understood. LoNita never explicitly said Jay was disrespecting the Scriptures but that was clear too!
5. Jay saw LoNita as a legalist. LoNita saw Jay as a libertarian, excusing sin.
6. Their debate could have been about a thousand specific topics. Can Christians eat meat sacrificed to idols? Must Gentiles be circumcised in order to be saved? Is there any legitimate reason for a divorce?
7. What is the relationship between law and grace? How does Christian behavior actually work? These are the questions I want to investigate in this lesson. I confess that what I am about to say comes as a result of my personal struggle with these issues. I invite you to enter with me into this struggle.

### Discussion:

- I. The obligation of obedience. Failure to understand the obligation of obedience may lead to a diminishing of the Law of God.
  - A. The Law is a reflection of God's nature.
    1. When I first started studying the Law of God I saw it as a set of arbitrary rules that God used to test to see whether or not I would obey Him.
    2. Further investigation lead me to understand that God's rules are a reflection of His own nature. They are not arbitrary at all, but are a reflection of who He is.
    3. Additionally, they are a reflection of who we are as individuals created in His image. Meaning that when I fail to obey His rules I violate my own nature as created in His image. Violating the Law of God not only violates His nature, but it violates my own nature. When I sin against someone else I have violated His nature, my own nature and the nature of the one I have sinned against.
    4. One cannot take fire into his bosom without being burned. One cannot take sin into

his bosom without destruction as the consequence. And so, God's laws are "for our good always" (Deut. 6:24).

5. This is what makes God's Laws right! God's Laws protect the value of the individual. Provide equity to each. Protect the rights of the innocent. Demand consequences for violation. Etc. Failure to respect "image of God" creation mistakes "God's Laws as unnecessary restrictions.

B. As creatures we are obligated to obey.

1. God's right as Creator means He has authority over. Rom. 9:20-21 asks, "Who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?"

2. To say that "I obey God because I love Him," confuses motivation with obligation. We may be motivated to obey God because we love Him, but we are obligated because He is Creator and we are the created!

C. There is a chasm between God's nature and our performance. This is a fact the reality of which is not to be denied.

1. As a matter of fact the chasm is so great that it seems impossible for us to live up to God's expectations of us. I cringe when I read Jesus' statement, "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). And when I read, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you" (Jn. 13:34).

2. And so, like the Pharisees, I tend to justify myself, reinterpret God's Law to lower the requirements so that it appears that I am living up to the expectations. Cf. Matt. 5:20ff; 15:3ff.

3. Such an approach allows one to be confident in their performance and to view others with contempt who are not living up to my rules (Lk. 18:9-12).

D. Such an approach fails to accept responsibility and excuses one from the obligation and from the failure to perform. It diminishes the severity of sin while exalting the self. I actually become the rule maker, elevating myself to the position of god.

II. While we are obligated to obey the rules it is not some dry legalistic obedience. Such an approach is balanced by our being motivated by love.

A. The people of God have been touch by His grace.

1. When I compare myself with the Law of God I am crushed by the weight of my disobedience. The first part of Rom. 6:23 kills me. "The wages of sin is death." All of my maneuvering, justifications, relaxing of the demands of the law smack me in the face when I realize I am guilty and death is the inevitable consequence.

2. Paul crushes me when he says, "There is none righteous . . ." (Rom. 3:10-20).

3. But just when I am crushed I am lifted up. "But the free gift of God is eternal life in

Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:23).

4. There is none righteous, but God makes righteous by means of the blood of Christ (Rom. 3:21-26). And even though I am a violator my penalty has been paid.
  5. Here’s how that works for me. I don’t have to justify myself. I don’t have to diminish the rules. I can accept the reality of my sinfulness. I can accept myself as a sinner (cf. Lk. 18:13). I am delivered by a gracious God!
- B. My response is one of thanksgiving. Like the one leper who was healed who returned to give God glory (Lk. 17:11ff). Worship, submission, obedience seems the natural response.
- C. It is a moral obligation. It is the right thing to do.
- D. It is at least related to God having put His spirit in us, if it is not the meaning of the spirit of God within us (cf. Ezek. 36:25-27).
- E. It is this message of God’s grace that softens hearts and motivates willing obedience.

III. “But wait,” you object. “I have been touched by God’s grace. I am thankful. I am motivated by my love for what He has done for me, but I still sin.” That is indeed the reality, for me too.

- A. Apparently for Paul too (cf. Rom. 7:14ff).
- B. There is a continual need for grace (Rom. 7:25-8:1ff). There is a need for “putting to death the deeds of the body” on an ongoing basis (Rom. 8:13). The letters of the N.T. are written to Christians with this as their premise.
- C. John wrote: “I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins.” And: “If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 2:1-2; 1:6-7).
- D. In other words, our performance is imperfect but growing in grace.
  1. This imperfection is no excuse to engage in sinful behavior.
  2. Our understanding of our need for grace is always increasing.
  3. Our motivation is increasing.
  4. Our obedience is increasing.
  5. There is no place for boasting (Rom. 3:27). There is no place for viewing others with contempt. There is no place for confidence in one’s self, only dependence upon the gift of God, expressed in voluntary obedience, coupled with confession and forgiveness through the blood of Christ.

Conclusion:

1. So, LoNita is right. I need to respect the law and obey it. But I have failed!

2. And Jay is right. We are saved by grace. I must accept responsibility, acknowledge my guilt and accept the gift of God. But this is no license to sin.
3. Neither is legalism, nor lawlessness the plan of God. Instead there is the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5; 16:26) that both accepts forgiveness and refuses to continue in sin.