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**Grace & Grit**  
**Part 4 – Freedom from Legalism**  
Shay Robbins

We are continuing our series – *Grace & Grit*. The Robbins family practiced grace and grit over spring break together as a family. Was anyone else practicing grand and grit? We did it in an RV, driving across the country to the Grand Canyon. This is our second year in a row, and it was National Lampoon's. We made it all the way across the country. Sage was so tired that she fell asleep before we got to the canyon and napped her way through it. She missed the whole thing. Dad actually felt the same way, but I just toughed it out.

Two miles before we actually got to the Grand Canyon, it was snowing. Somebody lost control of their vehicle in front of us, and I gave them a little love tap in the rear end of their vehicle. So, we spent about three extra hours getting a police report done. I actually heard that a couple years ago the Hutchcrafts actually hit a moose and totaled their vehicle. So, I feel like that is way more notable. For those of you who are moose lovers, don't worry, it was dead on impact... is what I'm told.

Also, one of our kids likes to puke when she eats too much sugar, so we did that. She puked all over the place, an amazing amount of puke; it was phenomenal. Then, when we got home, I realized that my license plate actually rattled off of the Winnebago. It was completely gone. So, if we were to get pulled over and the police officer asked me, "Where is your license plate," I would have to tell them, "Somewhere in Oklahoma." It was a super exciting trip, practicing grace and grit the whole way.

Today, we are here talking about *Freedom from Legalism*. I think this is a really important topic for all of us. It applies to everybody in their life in one way or another. I want to start just by defining it.

Philip Yancey gives a really good definition of what legalism is. "*Legalism is the idea that a person can follow a list or a set of rules to be a holy person. A person who relies on legalism doesn't recognize God's grace or have absolute faith in him because some of the work of salvation has been transferred to them.*"

So, we're taking on an unnecessary role of working our way into right standing with God. It's an unnecessary burden. This hits our family personally. Ashley grew up as the pastor's daughter, a prominent pastor in the Southern Baptist Convention. She spent her entire life in the front row and now she sits in the back. I was in the back because it was a better place to nap growing up and now, I want to sit in the front. So, as a married couple, we met in the middle and we sit in the back.

She and I have two different stories, but as I've kind of processed through legalism, it seeped its way into each one of our lives in different ways.

Last night, she prayed for me and this opportunity to teach the Bible with you. She prayed that God would give me a shepherd's heart. That's really the approach that I want to take. I want to come to the church body with a pastoral approach to a really important topic that's relevant to all of us. It was also relevant to Jesus. In Matthew 23, for almost the entire chapter, he gives a scathing rebuke of the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day. He goes off on them.

Before I read this passage, I want to give you an analogy that I think will kind of help us understand the kind of burden we're talking about. Right now is actually one of my favorite times of the year. There is a world-wide fitness competition taking place called the CrossFit Open. So, we're in the middle of it. It's a five-week competition and there are actually hundreds of thousands of people participating from all around the country. One of the work outs that is famous in the CrossFit community is called the Murph. The Murph is actually named after Navy Seal Lieutenant Michael Murphy. He was killed in battle in Afghanistan. Many of you guys have probably heard or read his story from the book and the movie called *Lone Survivor*. At his funeral, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for acts of valor. The CrossFit community is taking one of the workouts that he did on a regular basis and they've dubbed it The Murph.

The Murph is where you run one mile, then you do 100 pullups, 200 pushups, 300 air squats, and then you run another mile. So, the first mile is kind of a warm up and then you do the calisthenics, and the blood is just pumping through you body. And then the last mile is basically excruciation; it's like death on wheels. So, if that's not bad enough... I've done that several times over the years and it is a brutal workout, but that's not it. The actual correct version was done by Murph in body armor. So, the CrossFit community will take a 20-pound weighted vest and strap it to their body and do the Murph. I mean 100 pullups alone is a lot. But you strap this body armor on and as you do the work out... Even to step away like if you're in between reps of pushups or pullups... To step away and try to recover is so hard because the vest is squeezing down. It's an added burden that's weighing down on your chest. It makes hard to recover, hard to rest, hard to breath.

A lot of us who are suffering or dealing with legalism of faith, we're carrying around this kind of a burden. Legalism makes it hard to breath. Here's what Jesus said. This is just an excerpt from Matthew **23. Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples. 2 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees..."** So, these are religious leaders of his day. **"...sit in Moses' seat," he said.** That wasn't necessarily a bad thing. In other words, they are saying Moses was the leader of Israel, Moses has passed on and they've stepped up in that leadership role. That's not a bad thing.

**3 "So you must be careful to do everything they say."** In other words, as they show you the way of faith, you can follow them. **"But don't do what they do. They don't practice what they preach."** This is what we all hate. It's hypocrisy. **4 "They tie up heavy loads that are hard to carry. Then they put them on other people's shoulders. But they themselves aren't willing to lift a finger to move them. 5 Everything they do is done for others to see."** Do y'all see that? So, physically, this burden makes it hard to breath, but spiritually speaking, when we're talking about legalism, legalism is putting a burden on you where it makes it hard to breath.

Today, I want to talk about that because some of it is imposed by our environment and then other parts of it are self-imposed. Why do we do that to people and why do we do that to ourselves? I think part of it is our human nature. Earning is a default setting for mankind. In fact, many of us spend our entire lifetime earning. We work to earn, so we're conditioned to earn. I have a long list. We earn money, respect, applause, promotion, acceptance, and any other number of things. That's part of being a human being as we work to earn.

The problem is that we take that concept and apply it to our faith. Here's what Jesus said in response to that. He says, **28 "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."**

Let me ask you this. How does that narrative fit in your personal life story? The difference between working, earning, and carrying extra burden versus finding rest and comfort in Christ. How does that fit in your story? For me, as I was kind of personalizing this and just thinking through it, God gave me kind of a word picture. I was in this spring break mode, but I was thinking about myself as a young man. The way that I looked at sin, it was enticing to me. I just picture spring break. There's nothing wrong with spring break. It's what you do on spring break that is the problem.

My view, my rose-colored glasses of a pleasure-filled lifestyle was like sitting out on the beach with the sunshine, nothing to worry about, a drink in my hands, surrounded by beautiful people, and it was all good, rosy. That's the way I wanted to live my life. The problem is that when the sunsets, darkness eclipses, and I found myself out on that beach alone and the sand was sinking all around me. What formerly was so enticing and tasted and felt and looked so good was beginning to swallow me up and press on me from all sides. It became hard to breath.

So, what did I do? I started to dig my way out. I dug and I dug and I dug, and the more that I struggled, the more that I sank. I didn't know it at the time, but I was trying to clean myself up. I was trying to work my way into being in favor with God. That never works. It doesn't matter what your sin struggle is, sin is sinking sand and the more that you struggle, the more that you sink.

So, after struggling and trying to get myself out of that situation, what I finally realized was that Jesus was there, extending a hand. The hand was always there, but I was too busy struggling. I finally reached out and took hold of his hand and he pulled me up out of that which I couldn't remove myself from. He dusted off my shoulders and he allowed me to enter his rest.

Now matter where you're at in your faith journey, you can find yourself in that same sinking sand. The beauty of all of it is there's only one way to get out. And that one way is always available. No matter where you're at in your faith journey, no matter how old you are, no matter how bad you messed up, Jesus wants to grab your hand and pull you out.

So, what I want to do right now, as a church body, is I want to take a step back and look at the different ways that legalism can find its way into our life. My hope is that if we educate our selves and we get a

fresh perspective of some of these threats, then we can take some time to be introspective and hopefully grow to a healthier place together as a church.

I was talking with Ted on the phone, and he said there are many faces of legalism. I think that's a great way to put it. I've got three categories and they kind of bleed together, but they help me understand how legalism works its way into my life.

## **1. Focusing on Religion more than Relationship.**

- a. Traditions
- b. Generational Family Expectations
- c. Cultural dos and don'ts
- d. Liturgy

These are all things that are kind of like atmospheres that you find yourself in. A cultural atmosphere that influences you.

**Traditions** – You guys hear this at Woodland Hills all the time. We take tradition, reason, experience, and emotion and we pay attention to them, we honor them, we think they are important, but we never put them in the driver's seat. We put God's Word in the driver's seat, and we put the others in the bus together. But they have to be in the right place. When tradition becomes more important than relationship, we find ourselves in a religion of dos and don'ts.

**Generational Family Expectations** – This is a huge one. Everybody in here grew up in a different household and a different church environment. That spiritual atmosphere has affected you. In some cases, it has become very much a **faith of dos and don'ts** which transfers from a relationship to a religion.

**Liturgy** – These are just customs within churches or families that you do over and over again, and the more you do them, the more they become important. And the more important they become, they begin to find their way to an unhealthy role in our life.

All of these things are often socially imposed burdens. In other words, these are things that you need to be aware of in what's around us and who is influencing us, so that we're on guard against legalism forcing its way into my life.

## **2. Following rules without a surrendered heart.**

**a. Going through the motions** – Just thinking through our church body, I think a lot of times about teenagers. You're growing up in a spiritual atmosphere that, in some ways, is imposed on you. But your faith will never become your own until you take responsibility for it, until it becomes a part of a relationship that you have with God. And until we get to that point, teenagers just find themselves going through the motions and often become very apathetic about their faith. The key to step out of that apathy is to take ownership.

**b. Being a “nice guy,” a nice girl,” or good people”** – I think a lot the boomers in this one. My grandparents, we grew up in the Midwest, farm families on both sides. The men in our family didn’t cry, didn’t show weakness or emotion, and they didn’t talk about God. My family is filled with really good people, but that is legalism. Really and truly, if we are just trying to be a good person and that’s the ultimate goal, we become legalistic. I think a question I want to ask you is: if you find yourself going to church on a regular basis, but unable to talk about your faith with people and most specifically with the people you love the most, this is you.

I realize that after decades of growing up and living this way, this would be a very hard thing to break out of. I just want to challenge you. It’s not too late to break out of a pattern of legalism. In fact, we’ve got some amazing care pastors on our staff, Rex and Don, and that’s a great, safe place for you to go and process through. The thing is, they are old just like you, and they can relate. We talked with them earlier today. For both of those men, their story is growing up in a church that was full of legalism and having broken free from it. They have a heart to minister to people who are struggling with it too. They want to help you.

**c. Taking on the burden of self-righteousness (less subtle approach)** – When you take on the burden of self-righteousness... In this one, I think about a lot of moms. They moms that feel like they have to be everything to their family, everything to their community and the things they are involved in. They have to be everything on social media. A lot of times, it’s from social pressures and pressures growing up where they feel the need to have it all together – perfectionism. That’s just another form of legalism and it’s a trap. This is often a self-imposed burden. It’s super important to know, “Hey, this is on me, like I get to take responsibility for this.”

**d. Adding human rules to God’s rules and treating them as divine** – R.C. Sproul helped me kind of understand this concept. He said, *“The most common and deadly form of legalism is when we add our own rules to God’s law and treat them as divine... We have no right to heap up restrictions on people where He has no stated restriction.”*

Often times, we add human rules to God’s rules and then we begin to treat them as divine. Sadly, this is a burden that we impose on other people. I think of the leaders out there: business leaders, influencers, moms and dads who are leading families. This is something that we’ve got to take inventory of in our life. How am I influencing the people in my life?

I have a question specifically to the moms and dads. Is your home rigid or is it restful? Some of you, your kiddos have come and gone. Was your home rigid or was it restful? Many times, when we have a rigid home, our kids go off and they reject the faith to various degrees. I want to encourage you today. If you look back and you feel like *wow, our home was legalistic. It was too rigid.* There’s hope there for you. And the process that we need to walk through is to go to those that we love, our kiddos, and take ownership of it and confess it. “God has opened my eyes. I recognize that x, y, and z was me just pressing and forcing morality on you or forcing religiousness on you.” Take ownership and then ask for forgiveness.

And there is great hope both for parents and kids in Ephesians 4. **32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.** We need to be gracious back and forth. Grace is freely given and openly received.

Now that we've kind of laid some ground work, I'm going to challenge us to get introspective, and I'm going to ask you to channel your inner Dr. Phil. Dr. Phil is known for being brutally honest and that's the way we need to be with ourselves. **How can we erode into legalism?** I think, generally speaking, it's my thought process that with church body, it's probably less of an issue with being immersed in legalism than the potential of eroding into it. The reason I think that is part of it is Pastor Ted's story. He grew up in the premillennial, fundamental, King James Version only Baptist church. So, it's a part of his mission. Part of our church theology is that we are saved through faith alone in Christ alone. We fight back against legalism on a regular basis. That doesn't mean that we can't erode into it.

So, I really have done some self-introspection myself, and I want to kind of lay my cards on the table and just kind of show you what God revealed in my life. I have a list of five things where I either am or am susceptible to eroding into legalism. I'm going to walk you through them:

**1. Being judgmental and critical of others.** This is a hard pill to swallow because as I read through Mathew 23, Jesus goes off on the Pharisees and the scribes for just this, for pointing a finger at all the people that were in their congregation and all the things that they were doing wrong. Sadly, if I'm honest with myself, I do this internally. Maybe I'm not pointing my finger and calling it outright, but most certainly in my heart and my mind, I am judgmental and critical of others. The prescription for this ailment is Lamentations 3. I go there all the time because of this issue. **39 Why should the living complain when punished for their sins?** Ya'll hear that? Hypocrisy is looking outward, but who am I to offer complaint in view of my own sin? That humbles me and sets my perspective. **40 Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord.**

**2. Comparing myself to others and finding self-righteousness in that.** Again, in Matthew 23, Jesus goes after the religious leaders for placing themselves upon a pedestal and essentially looking down at people. Again, in my heart and my mind, I can do that. I think the reason it's so easy to get lured into is that when you look for other people who are doing worse than you, it makes you feel better about yourself. That's legalism and that's sin. The scripture that came to mind for that was in Philippians 2 - **3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.** What that helps me do is it reminds me to get off the pedestal and put other people on it.

**3. Discipline shifting from delight to duty.** Discipline kind of has a negative connotation, just the word itself. But really and truly, the spiritual disciplines are what help us build relationship with God. So, spending time in prayer, and studying his word, and gaining wisdom from older believers are all things and practices that help me to grow in that relationship. Out of that love relationship, then comes the good works and the life-change. It's a fruit of that relationship. But what I can catch myself doing is going through the motions on a daily basis of those disciplines and they just become a duty. It's like a check box. And when those disciplines become a check box in my day, it becomes legalism and a pursuit of self-righteousness.

Matthew 6: 33 reminds me **33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.** In other words, I seek relationship; that's my pursuit. And then all of the things, the good works and the fruit that comes from that, is a product of that relationship.

**4. Hearing a message and thinking all about the other people it applies to.** One of the things that we all despise. When I read Matthew 23 and I read about all these things that these religious leaders were doing, it makes me irate. I despise them. But I can easily hear a message like this and begin to think about all the other people it applies to and what they need to learn. You know what that is? It's hypocrisy, it's sin. Philippians 2 reminds me – **12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation...** Do you hear that? Work out your own salvation, not your neighbor's salvation, not your dad's salvation, not your boss's salvation, work out your own salvation, Shay Robbins, **...with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.**

**5. When I begin to think that I've arrived.** When I get puffed up or when I get proud of the things that I've done. In Philippians 3, Paul says, **13 Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**

I think what I can do is when God does something cool, I can begin to take credit for it. And if I make the mistake of taking credit for the cool things that God has done, I can become prideful and proud of myself. As soon as I do that, there is a turn into legalism. Ya'll see how fast it happens? Instead, this is the difference – I pursue him, he does cool things through me. Instead of taking credit, I praise him for it. "Lord, thank God for letting me be a part of this adventure with you. You are awesome." Instead of focusing on all those things and getting puffed up, I need to turn and say, "Okay, God, I am a sinner today and I need your help. Let's do this thing again together. Help me, Lord, to walk my faith out." And oh, by the way, this is a way better way to live.

There are lots of other paths. There are really any number of ways to get there, but my question is where does the danger lie for you? Perhaps it's in perfectionist tendencies, habits, upbringing, apathetic approach to faith, tradition, poor theology, misconceptions about the gospel.

What is it for you? Channel that inner Dr. Phil. Be honest with yourself. "God, show me where I am susceptible. Show me where I'm eroding into legalism."

To close, I want to go back to Ephesians 2. Pastor Ted brought this up two weeks ago and I have been unable to get it out of my mind. I'm just going to read it to you today.

**As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...** Did y'all hear that? Buried to your neck in quicksand. You were dead in your offenses and sins. **2 ...in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.** That's who I am apart from Christ. **3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made**

***us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace... Remember, grace is unmerited favor. There's nothing you did to earn his love and kindness towards you. ...you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.***

Each day in his grace we're offered a daily reset. His mercies are new every morning, great is his faithfulness. We get to unpack our bags. We get to shed our unnecessary burden every day. We lay that burden at his feet and we get to walk in both freedom and rest.

Stephanie Watson, when she is feeling anxious, she asks herself, *What am I carrying that I shouldn't be?*

We get to unload that at the foot of the cross. Church, I want to encourage you to breathe easy. Let's stand and pray together.

Lord, we come to you collectively with a humble heart. We choose humility. I want to pray, God, that you would give us a heart to pursue relationship with you. And that our faith would be found in that. I want to pray, God, that you would open our eyes to legalism that has either become a part of our life or is a threat to our life. I want to pray, God, that you give us the courage to deal with it and to take your hand, Lord, and allow you to pull us up out of that quicksand, God. Lord, I thank you for the men and women at Woodland Hills Family Church, a blessing in the name of Jesus. And it's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.