**Law and Grace**

Acts 15

I grew up ***going to church*** every Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night - plus special events. It was just what you did. The pastor would preach in the morning, then preach again Sunday evening. You’d get more Bible teaching in Sunday School. Then memorize lots of verses in the midweek Bible club.

I know it wasn’t actually presented this way, but it felt to me as I grew up like **God had a scorecard**.

**God’s Scorecard**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Add Points | Lose Points |
|  |  |

There were things you could do that would ***score you points with God*** - like attending all of these Bible teaching opportunities. An obvious way to ***lose points*** was to NOT attend Sunday morning, Sunday School, Sunday night and Wednesday night. But there were also BONUS POINTS - as some people went to Nursing Home ministry as well on Sundays. Those were the high achievers!

**God’s Scorecard**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Add Points | Lose Points |
| * Attend Sunday worship, Sunday School, Sunday evening * Attend Wednesday night * BONUS: Nursing Home! | * Don’t attend Sunday programs * Don’t attend Wednesday night |

Of course, that’s not where the scoring stopped. There was a pretty much never-ending list of ways to both score points and lose points. Obviously you were supposed to ***read your Bible*** every day - and the more verses you read, the more points you scored. You should pray every day - again, the more minutes you prayed, the more points you scored. And to MISS a day of Bible reading or prayer… Whoa - big points lost there.

**God’s Scorecard**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Add Points | Lose Points |
| * Attend Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday night * Read Bible, pray | * Don’t attend Sunday / * Don’t attend Wednesday * Fail to read Bible or pray |

And then there were ***the “big ones.”*** These were highlighted in the pastor’s most passionate preaching. These were mentioned over and over. It was called HOLINESS. It was called COMMITMENT. It was called WISDOM.

**God’s Scorecard**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Add Points | Lose Points |
| * Attend Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday night * Read Bible, pray * **Avoid alcohol, rock music, movies, cards & swearing** | * Don’t attend Sunday / * Don’t attend Wednesday * Fail to read Bible or pray * **Drink alcohol, rock music, TV , movies, cards & swear** |

These were considered ***the primary “marks” of a true Christian***. It was the “wink” and “nudge” of true believers - that you could tell who was “one of you,” by their behavior on these points. If you saw someone drinking, heard them swearing or talking about secular music - you could be sure they were “worldly,” not saved and definitely a bad influence to steer clear of.

This is why it was so striking to me, in middle school, to hear legit Christian preachers say:

**Gospel Clarity**

“Nothing you do can make God love you more.

Nothing you do can make God love you less.”

I remember hearing that and being **immediately confused**. If that is true - what about God’s scorecard? What about all the things you can do to gain points and to lose points? Are you saying that God *doesn’t have a scorecard?*Think of what tremendously good news that would be! No scorecard for us at all? No point system? No ledger tracking our daily, moment by moment ups and downs?

Yes, that would be good news indeed!

Of course, the truth is that ***God does have a scorecard***, but He knew none of us could possibly get the perfect score needed to be saved and live in heaven. So Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness - to earn the perfect score - **and all who come to Jesus in faith are given HIS PERFECT SCORE**. We can’t earn it. But Jesus did! The gift of JUSTIFICATION is the gift of a perfect scorecard before God.  
  
That’s why ***you can’t do anything to earn more of God’s favor***. And you can’t do anything to lose any of God’s favor. In Christ you have 100% of God’s favor. He loves you completely, infinitely and eternally - just as He loves Jesus Christ.

What we’ll see in Acts 15 is that my experience is nothing new. This has been going on since the earliest days of the church. Look at verse 1.

“But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘**Unless you are** circumcised according to the custom of Moses, **you cannot be saved**.’” Acts 15:1

We learn later in the chapter that these men were from ***the party of the Pharisees* AMONG THE believers** (v. 5). These were not Jewish law-keepers outside of the church - but Jewish background followers of Christ! These were Christians who kept the Jewish law themselves and were actively teaching that ALL CHRISTIANS - all TRUE Christians - really should do the same. In fact, they MUST do the same. Look at verse 5!

“But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘**It is necessary** to circumcise them and **to order them** to keep the law of Moses.’” Acts 15:5

Do you see that language? It is NECESSARY… We must ORDER THEM to keep the law. Whoa! These are not suggestions and encouragements - these are presented as **mandates necessary for salvation**!

Acts 15 vividly illustrates the dangers of **legalistic obligations**. We’ll see the three damaging effects of such obligations and then shift to the three blessings of personal disciplines.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Legalistic Obligations** | **Personal Disciplines** |
| 1. Effect on the Gospel | |
| 1. Effect on the Believer | |
| 1. Effect on the Community | |

At a glance ***legalistic obligations and personal disciplines APPEAR SIMILAR*** - but they are as different as hydrochloric acid and water. **HCL and H2O** both look like clear liquids - but if you drink them, you’ll immediately experience the toxic and devastating effect of hydrochloric acid over against the refreshing, rejuvenating blessing of clear, fresh water. Legalistic obligations may look good - but they are toxic to your spiritual life and to any community you are a part of. We’ll look at the three effects of legalism and then the three effects of personal discipline - how legalism distorts the gospel, burdens the believer and creates a culture of judgment while discipline celebrates the gospel, empowers the believer and promotes a culture of mutual encouragement. First, the acid of legalistic obligation.

**Legalistic Obligations:**

1. **Distort** the Gospel

“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Acts 15:1

It is clear from the first verse that ***what is at stake here is salvation itself***. These Jewish believers from the Pharisee’s party are actively preaching that you must be circumcised to be saved. You must follow the whole Jewish law - from its first demand of circumcision on the eighth day.

This is the mark of **ALL RELIGIONS**. They all introduce one or more demands as prerequisities for salvation. In effect, they say:

**Legalistic Obligations:**

1. **Distort** the Gospel

“Unless you are \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, you cannot be saved.” Acts 15:1

* Unless you are **Catholic**, you cannot be saved.
* Unless you are **Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, JW, Mormon**… you cannot be saved.
* Unless you keep **this list of rules**.
* Unless you **avoid these behaviors** (the list I was taught was drinking, smoking, rock music, bad movies and playing cards).

***Every religion has its own list.*** That’s what makes it a religion - it has a set of beliefs and practices you must embrace in order to be saved. Every religion has a detailed scorecard - a way you gain points with God and ways you lose points.

And yes, the ***modern religious liberal movement*** of tolerance and acceptance for all people has its own set of rules. You must be tolerant. You must not speak out against the choices anyone makes regarding their gender identity or sexual preference. You must be totally supportive of the choices people make. If you dare to express any kind of critique of the LGBTQ revolution, as Focus on the Family did, you immediately lose a million points and get kicked off of Twitter. “Unless you express constant support for LGBTQ, you cannot be saved.”

The question for each of us today - is ***what is YOUR list?*** What do YOU feel scores you more points with God? What do you feel costs you points with God?

* “Unless you **read your Bible** every day, you cannot be saved.”
* “Unless you **pray for 3 hours** like a German monk, you cannot really be saved.”
* “Unless you **preach like Billy Graham** and serve the downtrodden like Amy Carmichael and give your life to missions like Hudson Taylor, you cannot be saved.”
* “Unless you **avoid television** and red meat and short hair and bad words… you cannot be saved.”

Do you believe that God has a scorecard and some things you do make Him love you more, while other things you do make Him love you less? Legalistic obligations DISTORT THE GOSPEL.

These Jewish preachers were not just teaching their personal convictions, they were universalizing their preferences and placing them explicitly on others, clearly saying that their practices were necessary for salvation.

**Legalistic Obligations:**

1. **Distort** the Gospel

“It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.” Acts 15:5

See, it wasn’t just about circumcision - just as legalistic rules today are not about the length of your skirt or hair. It was about ***the whole set of rules***, the whole package. And what that rule set does is elevate the rule-makers and rule-keepers. With religion you find it isn’t about GOD anymore, it’s about the leaders of the religion - it’s about their power, their reputation. They COLLECT followers like trophies on display and they’re threatened and angry if anyone tries to take away their trophies.

And look at the burden this places on believers!

**Legalistic Obligations:**

1. **Burden** the Believer

“It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.” Acts 15:5

If we announced today that all of you **MUST keep the full law of Moses** think of what that would mean. You would have to immediately change your diet to eat fully kosher. Pork would be out, ceremonial handwashing would be in. You better get some sheep and goats because you’re going to need a lot of sacrifices to pay for your many sins. Imagine the burden of fully obeying the law of Moses, especially if you never have - you don’t know how to go about it, you don’t know where to begin.

Now, make this modern in its requirements. Let’s say the elders of Oakwood came out with **“the Law of Oakwood.”** And we said to be part of our church everyone had to sign a covenant promising to follow this set of rules:

**The Law of Oakwood:**

1. We will never watch TV or movies
2. We will never use social media
3. We will never watch or read the news
4. We will never listen to secular music

**The Law of Oakwood:**

1. We will read the Bible 2 hours /day
2. We will memorize 1 chapter / week
3. We will give 25% to the church
4. We will only spend time with Oakwood people

Now, hear me - ***this is FICTION***. But imagine if we did this. If the leadership set up a set of rules and demands and said, “Unless you do these things, you cannot be saved.” Do you see how badly that would both ***distort the gospel and burden all of you?*** You would all rightly go look for other churches.

You would rightly say, “**Who are you** to impose these demands on us?” And the answer is - we have no such right, no more than the Jewish believers did in the early church. Look at verse 10.

**Legalistic Obligations:**

1. **Burden** the Believer

“Why are you putting God to the test by ***placing a yoke*** on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” Acts 15:10

Legalistic obligations place **a heavy yoke** on the necks of believers. And this is what Jesus accused the Pharisees of doing - placing a heavy yoke on OTHERS that they weren’t even lifting themselves! They demanded that other people give sacrificially while they kept all of their money for themselves. They demanded that other people recognize THEM while they refused to give honor to anyone else. They demanded that people follow rigorous religious practices that they barely followed in public and completely ignored in private. They weren’t actually people of prayer - they didn’t pray at all in private while they made long public prayers as an act to impress people on the street.

Now, fast forward to the end of this section in verse 28.

**Legalistic Obligations:**

1. **Burden** the Believer

“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements.” Acts 15:28

After much debate, discussion and prayer, the leaders of the early church concluded that the Gentiles were **FULL MEMBERS of the church with them** - and that they did not have to become Jewish in order to be active in the church. They did not have to be circumcised. They did not have to eat kosher. They did not have to follow the cleansing rituals and wear the special clothing. They did not have to embrace the Jewish prayer schedule.

The “requirements” they gave were simple, ***practical boundaries*** against some of the most dangerous cultural practices in the first century - basic expectations of all Christians regardless of their cultural background. 1) Avoid endorsing the idolatry of the age; 2) don’t drink blood or what was strangled - it’ll make you sick anyway; 3) avoid sexual immorality because it is so rampant and so devastating. And that was 2,000 years ago!

One more effect of legalism:

**Legalistic Obligations:**

1. Promote suspicion and **Judgment**

“He made no distinction between us and them.” Acts 15:9

Paul and Barnabas experienced with Gentile converts the same thing Peter did with Cornelius the Roman soldier - God make no distinctions. God does not play favorites. He does not show preference for Jews over anyone else. No one has a head start, a leg up. ALL HAVE SINNED. All fall short. Everyone needs a Savior. Everyone needs the blood of Jesus to the same degree.

Legalism creates a ***toxic culture of mutual suspicion and judgment*** - where leaders keep close watch and try to police their people. And it becomes like a communist country with neighborhood informers - you can’t trust anyone because a family member or close friend could call the authorities and report you for the smallest infraction. You never feel safe. You can never let down the facade.

So here is our first half summary:

|  |
| --- |
| **Legalistic obligations:** |
| 1. Distort the gospel |
| 2. Burden the believer |
| 3. Promote suspicion and judgment |

Do you see the effect legalism has on the gospel, on you and on your relationships? Adding even a single **WORK to our salvation** is toxic to faith and community. Has someone imposed a work upon you? Has a person or group placed a burden on your shoulders?

Remember what Jesus said:

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest… For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:28,30

***The yoke of religion is heavy.*** It denies the gospel - that Jesus has carried the full weight of the Law and has already given us His perfect righteousness. Religion burdens believers with impossible demands and expectations. And it poisons community with suscipcion and judgment.

**But the gospel does the opposite**. The gospel of Jesus Christ sets us free from the burdensome weight of religion. It empowers us to live and serve in freedom and with purpose. And it energizes community in a culture of mutual encouragement and respect. Let’s turn now to the proper place of personal disciplines!

**Personal Disciplines:**

1. **Celebrate** the Gospel

“God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the gospel and believe.” Acts 15:7

Peter stood up in the assembly to remind the believers that **this was a gospel issue**. It was not really about circumcision or the law or any other religious practices. It was about the gospel.

That’s why Luke spent all of **Acts 10-11** on the conversion of the Gentiles in Cornelius’ house. That’s why Peter brought extra witnesses with him. That’s why the Lord repeated the lesson three times. This was eye opening, ***ground breaking, world shaking revelation***. This was a seismic shift in Jewish culture of the first century.

Letting Gentiles into their Jewish worshiping community would be like ***upper caste Hindus*** letting untouchable street urchins into their most secret temple rituals. This would be like the Hollywood elite letting high school freshmen from the local Glee Club into their private parties. This would be like the rich and powerful in their most prestigious country clubs opening up their lunch table to scruffy homeless people.

***God makes NO DISTINCTION***. He sees everyone the same way. He saves everyone the same way. He gives His Holy Spirit in full measure to everyone who calls on Jesus in faith.

**Personal Disciplines:**

1. **Celebrate** the Gospel

“God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us.” Acts 15:8

This is the **beauty and wonder of the gospel** - ***that God accepts ANYONE***. Any background. Any status. Any culture. Any nation. Anyone. He had to make it especially public and visible with the Gentiles or the Jewish believers would not have gotten the message.

**Personal Disciplines:**

1. **Celebrate** the Gospel

“He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.” Acts 15:9

**The cleansing power of the blood** of Jesus has the same effect on all people. We all need the grace of Jesus to the same extent, and it cleanses us all the same way - completely, internally, eternally. There are not levels of believer - with some classes on top and others below. It’s not that pastors and missionaries are more favored with God. It’s not extraverts who are better and higher level. It is not verbal, vocal, type A Christians who are more honored in God’s eyes. It is not those who have been in church longer who are more holy. It is not those who know their Bible better who are top tier in God’s eyes. It is not those who have a less checkered past.

Those who sinned more are not below you. Those who sinned less are not above you. The glorious truth of the gospel is that we are all exactly equal in our NEED for the Gospel and in the transformation the gospel accomplished for us.

When we freely choose our own disciplines it does not distort the gospel, it celebrates the gospel.

**Personal Disciplines:**

1. **Celebrate** the Gospel

“By giving them the Holy Spirit... having cleansed their hearts by faith.” Acts 15:8-9

* Working *from* salvation not *for it*.

Christian believer, you are fully cleansed by the blood of Jesus! He has saved you completely. He has given you his absolute and untarnished perfection. There is nothing left for you to do - **you stand before God JUSTIFIED** - righteous - dressed in the righteous, glorious perfection of Jesus.

As a holy Temple of the Lord, you have been baptized in the Holy Spirit, forever indwelt by the Spirit of the living God - given the mind of Christ, the power of the Godhead, the guidance of the Spirit inside of you.

As a blood-bought, Spirit-filled follower of Jesus ***you are now FREE TO WORSHIP*** exactly as the Lord leads YOU.

* You are free to read the Bible in whatever way best nourishes your heart and mind.
* You are free to pray in the ways you find most helpful and meaningful.
* You are free to serve in the ways that best fit your gifting and season of life.
* You are free to reach out in line with your personality and sensitive to your personal relationships.
* You are free to dress in ways that reflect your devotion to Jesus.
* You are free to wear your hair as you see fit.
* You are free to eat and drink what the Spirit leads you to eat and drink.
* You are free to watch and listen to what the Lord tells YOU. You can throw out your TV and cancel all streaming services or you can use your stimulus money to buy a 70 inch 4K ultra.

Did you catch that refrain? ***YOU ARE FREE!***

***You are not bound by the convictions and disciplines of ANYONE ELSE.*** Your parents chose certain practices they found helpful based on their background, their needs, their preferences. You are not bound by your parents.

Your friends in small group may have disciplines that inspire you - and you are free to embrace any of them that you think would be helpful. But you are also free to say, “God bless you with that! Let me know how it goes for you!”

This freedom is a celebration of the gospel! **In Christ**, we are free to follow the Holy Spirit inside us! We are not bound to any yoke but the one that binds us to Jesus Himself. As the Lord leads you, follow that leading. His yoke is always easy and His burden is always light.

So if the ***spiritual yoke you are carrying feels heavy and burdensome***, it may be time to evaluate some of your disciplines and consider if some of them are legalistic obligations placed on you by someone else. The Gospel of Jesus’ finished work breaks EVERY CHAIN. It releases you from every master except One - the One who died for you and rose again - the One to whom you will answer in the end.

And look at the results of this gospel celebrating freedom:

**Personal Disciplines:**

1. **Celebrate** the Gospel

“When they read it, ***they rejoiced*** because of its encouragement.” Acts 15:31

* Working *from* salvation not *for it*.

When the Gentiles heard this wonderful reminder that they did not have to add any special works to their salvation, they rejoiced! ***Nothing you do can make God love you more or less.*** You cannot add to the salvation Jesus accomplished for you. You cannot subtract from it. His work is complete. It is perfect. And all of it applies to you. We work FROM salvation, not FOR it.

It is not 50/50 - first half gift, second half work. It is 100%/0. Jesus paid it all. We live in response - and that response is one of JOY.

***If your walk with Jesus is not characterized by joy it is likely that you are carrying a legalistic yoke*** - a burden of trying to earn some part of your salvation. Be FREE from that! Lay it down at the foot of the cross. Whether it comes from the expectations of others or from your own desire to be self-sufficient and to pay something back or to earn some status - lay it down! Let it go! **The cross sets you free from all obligation!** Now, look at the second result of freely chosen personal disciplines.

**Personal Disciplines:**

1. **Empower** the Believer

“No greater burden than these requirements… If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.” Acts 15:28-29

Legalism places a heavy burden on the believer. ***The gospel releases us from all burdens*** - most of all sin and the need to earn God’s favor. And this Gospel freedom EMPOWERS US into a joy-filled relationship with the Lord. It enables us to freely choose our own mix of spiritual disciplines. It lets us be CHILDREN OF GOD.

Think about **your parents**, when you were a kid - assuming you had good parents. (If you didn’t, then think of the best parents you knew.) Did your parents have a long list of chores you had to perform IN ORDER TO QUALIFY as a member of the family? Do you remember getting up in the morning and wondering if you were good enough for your mother or father? Did you go to bed at night worrying that you had not done enough to earn your dinner?

I certainly hope not! **FAMILY is what you ARE.** You don’t earn your place in the family by what you do - you are BORN into the family. You relate to mom and dad in love - you spend time with them because you CAN not because you MUST. It’s about RELATIONSHIP not OBLIGATION; it’s about love, not rules.

Freely chosen relationship ***EMPOWERS discipline***, doesn’t it? Isn’t this the miracle all parents want to see - their kids growing up and helping out because they WANT TO, not because the HAVE TO? Kids calling home because they love you, not because they NEED SOMETHING?

**Personal Disciplines:**

1. **Empower** the Believer

“If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.” Acts 15:29

* Not *abusing* freedom (to sin) but *using* freedom (to serve)

This whole chapter is about DISCIPLINE. It’s about LAW. It’s about setting rules. Rules are not bad when you choose them freely for yourself. Rules are bad when someone else forces them upon you and tells you that you HAVE TO DO THEM to be saved.

There are **twin dangers here**. The first we have looked at in detail - falling into legalistic obligation that distorts the gospel. But the other danger is also very real - falling into a form of SELF-INDULGENCE that is lazy, selfish and worldly.

We must be careful **not to abuse our freedom**, falling into sin. Laziness is sin. Neglecting our great salvation is sin. Failing to love God with all of our hearts is sin. Love of the world is idolatry. Instead of abusing our freedom, we should USE our freedom to serve the Lord - to love Him, love others and serve as the Lord made us and called us to.

Look at how the early church came to this decision - it’s very revealing of how the Holy Spirit works.

**Personal Disciplines:**

1. **Empower** the Believer

“Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them… After there had been much debate.” Acts 15:2,7

When these questionable teachers arose, the leaders in the church entered into **heated dialogue with them** - “dissension and debate.” They spent time discussing the issue, first in Antioch, then they went to Jerusalem to discuss further with the apostles and elders of the church. Look at the outcome:

**Personal Disciplines:**

1. **Empower** the Believer

“It seemed good to the apostles and elders… ‘It has seemed good to us, having come to one accord…’” Acts 15:22,25

Again this phrase is repeated in verse 28, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” What an EMPOWERING approach to decision-making! They prayed, they studied, they discussed - and, in the end, the Holy Spirit led them to ***a decision that “seemed good to them.”***

Do you see why we are a **congregational church**? Why we have elders who pray and seek the Lord for major decisions, then confer with the deacons before presenting “what seems good to us” to the church membership?

I won’t take a position on church government here, but this is why congregational government is the best. (Just making sure you caught that.)

But the point here is about **personal freedom**. How can YOU determine what disciplines are right for you? Pray about it. Study scripture for yourself. Discuss and debate with the people close to you. Confer with your small group. Feel free to ask me or Jason or another elder.

And trust that, at the end of the process the Holy Spirit will guide you to what ***“seems good to you.”*** And you are free to embrace that practice and adjust it down the road. Isn’t that wonderful gospel freedom? Doesn’t that change spiritual disciplines from a burdensome obligation into a joyful resource?

A great book on this topic is called ***Sacred Pathways*** by Gary Thomas. He describes 9 different ways Christians throughout history have connected with God - **contemplatives** who love peace and quiet; **scholars** who love books and theology; **servants** who love work and activity; **nature-lovers** who enjoy being outside with God, etc. Romans 6 wrestles with this topic of Christian freedom, as does Galatians 5.

**Personal Disciplines:**

1. **Empower** the Believer

“You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge your sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.” Gal. 5:13

* Not *abusing* freedom (to sin) but *using* freedom (to serve)

There is a very real danger that Christians can ***abuse our gospel freedom*** both in relation to God and in relation to others. The great commandments are to love God with all you are and to love your neighbor as yourself. Anything less than that is called SIN. Being free in Christ is not a license to SIN - it is the opposite! We are not free TO sin we are free FROM SIN. And personal disciplines help us in this area.

The **boundaries** the apostles and elders suggested to the Gentile believers are just that - BOUNDARIES to help protect them so they can enjoy their freedom and not fall into the traps of sin and the devil.

We have one more result to consider.

**Personal Disciplines:**

1. Promote understanding and **Encouragement**

“Judas and Silas… encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.” Acts 15:32

The chapter started with Pharisees coming to “trouble” (v. 19) the church. It ends on this note of encouragement. The Pharisees came with suspicion and judgment. But in the end mutual respect, understanding and encouragement prevailed. So here is our summary in contrast:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Legalistic obligations** | **Personal disciplines** |
| 1. Distort the gospel | 1. Celebrate the gospel |
| 2. Burden the believer | 2. Empower the believer |
| 3. Promote suspicion and judgment | 3. Promote understanding and encouragement |

Legalism imposed on you by another is toxic and burdensome. But disciplines you choose for yourself, as led by the Spirit, are necessary for your growth and effectiveness as a Christian. We work FROM salvation, not FOR salvation. In response to all Jesus has done for us, we SHOULD and MUST embrace rigorous discipline. The Gospel does not release us into laziness and self-indulgence, it catapults us into joyful devotion and zealous ministry.

**John Wesley** is probably the best example of rigorous discipline, since his approach was systematized as the Methodist Church. Wesley was born in 1703 - the 15th of 19 children his mother would bear. Susanna Wesley is probably the true hero of this story. She gave birth to 19 children and ten of them died in infancy - 9 she raised to know and follow Jesus.

From their earliest days Susanna and Samuel Wesley taught their children to read and write - in English, Latin and Greek, of course - and to memorize large sections of Scripture. Susanna ***catechized each child every day*** before lunch and again before evening prayers. You can imagine, by the time young John was 11 and ready to ship off to school, he was well indoctrinated in the Wesleyan disciplines of his childhood home.

At the age of five their ***home caught on fire*** and their neighbors managed to awaken the family so they all escaped - except John. He was stranded on the top floor, with the roof and stairs ablaze, preventing his escape. A neighbor was able to lift him out the window by standing on the shoulders of another - “a brand plucked from the fire,” Wesley later said.

John’s younger brother, Charles, started a holiness club at Oxford, which John joined and then began to lead. This small group developed many of the practices that would later become the “methods” Wesley spread all over the English-speaking world in the first great awakening. They prayed and studied Scripture for three hours every morning. They fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays until 3 p.m. They took communion every Sunday. They found ways to minister wherever they could, especially in the prisons.

Wesley developed a complicated grid for self-evaluation, testing his “spiritual disposition” every hour, and rating himself from 1 to 9. You can imagine the weight of this religious YOKE upon both Wesley and the others in his little group.

It’s no wonder that John needed to experience the joy of a personal experience with the God of love. Caught in a sudden and fierce storm crossing the Atlantic, Wesley was struck by the peace of a group of Moravian Christians who sang hymns and prayed as if nothing worrisome was happening.

When his ministry in America did not go well after two years, Wesley went back to the Moravians to learn what made them different. Hearing one teach on Luther’s preface to Romans:

“While he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, ***I felt my heart strangely warmed***. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” John Wesley, 1738

Wesley felt a sudden release from the burdens of religion and experienced the joy of complete forgiveness - of total righteousness in Christ. He continued to develop his own personal disciplines and to share those with any who would listen.

But the order is essential. Religion places burdens on your shoulders that you MUST PERFORM to be saved. ***The Gospel releases you from all of those burdens and invites you to freely and joyfully create YOUR METHOD***. What are your disciplines by which you love the Lord? What are your commitments by which you serve others and reach out with this life-changing gospel?

Let’s pray.