



by Thomas A. Gilson

It was more than 15 years ago, but I can still remember where I was: alone in my car by the tennis courts behind a high school.

• I was really down on myself. *I'm just not measuring up! I'm just not measuring up!* I kept thinking. I had been sincerely trying to live the way I thought a Christian should, but I wasn't succeeding. *What's wrong with me?* I wondered. • My biggest problem, I've realized since, was that I'd fallen from grace.

# "I Was a Legalist and Didn't Know It"

Exchanging a life of rules for a life of grace



## “Fallen from grace”

isn't a phrase we often apply to Christians who are trying to do their best. Usually it brings to mind a drunk in the gutter or a star executive sitting in jail after being convicted of fraud. That's how I used to think of it. I was surprised when I discovered the Bible uses “fallen from grace” to describe something completely different.

The phrase appears in Gal. 5:4 (*NASB*), where Paul told Galatian believers, “You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.” These Christians were trying to be right with God, but they had the wrong approach. I too was following the wrong approach. And like the Galatians, I didn't need to try harder to measure up. I needed a greater understanding of what it means to live by grace.

For many believers, living by grace is a difficult concept to grasp. Yet it is key to experiencing peace and power in our walks with Christ.

### From Beginning to End

To understand what it means to live by grace, we first need a clear idea of what grace is and how we access it. Many Christians define grace by the acronym “God's Riches at Christ's Expense.” God gives us grace, meaning He freely bestows His life, love, forgiveness, mercy, and other qualities on us based on Christ's merit, not our goodness. But this gift doesn't come from afar, like mail order. Neither is it a present we open and take away to enjoy on our own. Rather God extends His grace to us through a living, close relationship with Christ. To experience God's grace, we must remain

united with Christ in a dynamic connection, clinging as closely to Him as a branch does to a vine (Jn. 15:1-10).

That's not how the Galatian believers were living. Yes, they were trying hard to do everything right and follow God's laws. Instead of experiencing closeness to Christ, however, they were “severed from [Him].” Where had they gone wrong? It was their trying so hard—and the way they were doing it—that was the problem. They had drifted into legalism.

Legalism is the opposite of living by grace. It is the belief that we are justified (attain right standing with God) by following His rules. Paul addressed the error of this belief

throughout the book of Galatians, explaining that it is impossible to be right with God by obeying the law. We need grace.

Most evangelical Christians today know to avoid the most basic form of this error. We understand that our entrance into life in Christ—salvation—comes by grace through faith in Christ, not by keeping God's law. Yet even when our theology of salvation is thoroughly grace-based, we can still fall into legalism. Colossians 2:6 says, "Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him." That is, the way we live out our faith in Christ should be consistent with the way we received Him.

Many times, though, we fail to extend our dependence on grace past the foundation of *receiving* Christ to the daily matters of following Him. Instead we begin to think that we stay right with God by keeping His rules. That's what the Galatians were doing. After entering a relationship with Christ through grace, they thought they also needed to obey Jewish laws. Paul's instruction to them—and all believers—is clear: Just as we receive salvation by faith and grace, not by following the law, we also walk in Christ by faith and grace, not by keeping a list of commands.

## The Map or the Fuel?

"But wait a moment!" you say. "The Bible is full of commands, and they are there for a reason. Christians must obey them."

Yes, assuredly so. God expects us to do what He tells us. That puts us almost on the cliff of a contradiction: We have commands to obey, but if we seek to be right with God by following them, we fall from grace. So what are we to do? How can we try to heed God's commands and still live by grace? I've puzzled over this dilemma a great deal, and the key seems to lie in where we go to find the strength to carry out God's instructions. We have to make a distinction between the *picture of what is right* and the *power for doing it*.

God's commands are the picture: They describe how God wants us to live. But

they cannot give us the power, or spiritual strength, to live that way (see Ro. 7:7-23). We fall from grace when we begin to look to God's commands, the *picture* of the life He wants for us, to be our *power*.

I did something similar on a trip a few months ago. After flying to Milwaukee, I rented a car to drive to Madison. I hadn't been to either city in decades, so I knew nothing about the route. I gratefully accepted a map when the rental car company offered me one. In fact, since the map was free with the rental, I asked for several dozen. I took the maps to the car, opened the gas cap, and stuffed them into the tank one by one.

Well no, I didn't do that. That's a picture of a law-based approach to obeying God, though. We confuse the map with the fuel. We rely on God's commands to give us the fuel to get to our destination; in reality, they're just the map of what our destination looks like.

In contrast, living by grace means depending on the empowerment we receive through our relationship with Jesus Christ. "Abide in me, and I in you," Jesus told His disciples.

As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself,  
unless it abides in the vine, neither can  
you, unless you abide in me.

—Jn. 15:4, *ESV*

Elsewhere, Paul uses the phrase "walk by the Spirit" to talk about how crucial this close relationship with Christ is: "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16, *ESV*). His word choice reflects the reality that Christ now lives in us in the person of the Holy Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit," he adds,

is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.  
... If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk  
by the Spirit.

—vv. 22-23,25, *ESV*

These passages, just a few of many, tell us that when we remain in close relationship

I didn't need to try harder to measure up. I needed a greater understanding of what it means to live by grace.

with Christ through His Spirit, the Spirit will work His fruit in us, and our lives will match the picture shown by the commands. When we're living by grace like this, our life and strength come from our direct, unsevered connection with Christ, not from focusing on His commands.

So often, however, we begin to rely on the rules without realizing it. Wouldn't it be nice if there were alarms to tell us we're trying to run on the wrong fuel? Actually, there are.

## Warning Signs

I've identified several signals that warn me I'm drifting toward a law-based approach to life.

- Responding to temptation by telling myself, *I shouldn't do that!* and hoping such self-talk will enable me to resist. That's the willpower approach to handling sinful desires.
- Trying to motivate myself to do something "because I should." That's the duty-based approach to right living.
- Evaluating my standing before God based on how well I've been following the shoulds and shouldn'ts: If I've kept all the rules on a given day, then I'm OK before God; if I haven't, I'm not worth much before God that day. That's the performance-based approach to relationship with God.
- Beating myself up over my sins because I think my anger will help me do better in the future. *You idiot, Tom!* I might tell myself. *Don't you know that sin didn't do you any good? Just remember how bad you feel now, and let that be a lesson to you next time!* That's the anger-based approach to following God. Certainly we can and should learn from the negative outcomes of our poor decisions. What we should learn, though, is to draw closer to Christ and His unconditional love, not to be harder on ourselves and hope that will make us do better.
- Hearing myself say things like these to someone else or paying attention to someone saying them to me.

All of these responses are rule-oriented. They assume we'll stay on the right track if we keep all the shoulds and shouldn'ts in mind strongly enough. When we approach our Christian lives in these ways, we're not relying on relationship with Christ.

If you are like me, these signs of falling from grace are far too familiar. They reflect the way many of us live. What is the alternative? Cultivating a close, trusting, honest relationship with Christ and following His Spirit.

## Grace under Fire

The times we most need to strengthen our relationships with Christ are when we feel the least qualified to come to Him: when we're tempted or—strange as it might sound at first—even while we're sinning.

For example, I'm prone to impatience

when I'm on the highway behind slow drivers. Too often I try to handle this temptation by telling myself, *I shouldn't be feeling so impatient. I shouldn't be muttering at that driver; this isn't the Christian thing to do.* Thoughts like that, filled with shoulds and shouldn'ts, are law-based; they have no power to help me. Soon I'm heading right toward road rage.

If you're like me, connecting with Jesus at a time like this is the last thing on your mind. It's humbling to admit to Him what's going on inside. Offering a superficial prayer such as "Lord, help me be patient like I know I ought to be" seems more palatable. I'm discovering, though, that it's OK to tell Him what I'm really thinking and feeling. In fact, that's exactly what I need to do. Anything less is cutting off part of myself from Christ, His grace, and His power.

Opening up to Jesus might sound some-

thing like this: "Lord, here I am, being tempted to get impatient. What's worse, I think I have a *right* to be impatient. I mean, look at all these slow cars. If those jerks just knew how to drive . . . and You know what? I really do think they're being *jerks*. What do You think?"

A prayer like that is not pretty. There's rebelliousness there. But when temptation hits me, even when I slide into sin, that kind of prayer is a genuine move toward abiding in Christ. As I tell Him my weakness and admit my unruly thoughts, I open my heart toward Him so His Spirit can work in me.

My closing question—"What do You think?"—is crucial. By it I position myself to receive from the Lord. I'm saying, "Jesus, even though I'm a mess, I'm willing to let You do what You want to do in me." It's in this type of interaction, not in the rules, that I find grace.

