

DOING WHAT COMES UNNATURALLY

by Ray C. Stedman

Some years ago there appeared a popular song called, *Doing What Comes Naturally*. You may remember, it was all about hillbillies and the way they lived, and the repeated theme was "doing what comes naturally." That covers a multitude of sins, if I may paraphrase the Scriptures a bit. There are many things that it is just human nature to do, and one is to try to control ourselves or other people by using rules, regulations and laws. In a very real sense it is natural to be legal and law-minded. Listen to the conversation of people around you, or your own conversation, once in a while. Note how many times control by law is mentioned.

I heard a couple of people the other day on the street corner discussing some particular need in the community, and one man turned to the other and said, "You know there ought to be a law!" Whenever we find something going wrong that is our first reaction, isn't it? "There ought to be a law!"

I overheard a conversation some time ago in which a man and his wife were discussing a certain matter that had to do with the children at home. She said in a very stern tone of voice, "Boy, am I going to lay down the law about that when I get home."

We all react like that occasionally, don't we?

Did you ever say to someone, "I'm going to give you a piece of my mind." That is just another way of saying, "I'll tell you what you ought to do; I'll lay down the law to you."

Sometimes you hear someone determinedly say, "They are going to do it -- or else!" That is legality again, isn't it?

Last year, at the turn of the year, a lot of people were saying, "Well, I've decided to turn over a new leaf. I've signed a New Year's Resolution." That simply means, "I've passed a law concerning myself; now I'm going to behave in a certain way."

It is very evident from our conversation that it is a natural thing to be legalistic, and to want to control ourselves with law. But a Christian is called to be unnatural in that respect, or perhaps I should use the term "supernatural." This matter of control is a supernatural thing. We are not called to live by law, we are called to live by grace, and grace requires God's unending help in our life. It's doing what comes unnaturally!

Now, I want to begin with brief definitions of what law and grace really are, and then we will consider together some common misunderstandings of these two themes, and, finally, we'll look together at a marvelous illustration of grace at work in our lives.

LAW AND GRACE DEFINED:

Let us start with a definition. If someone asked you to define legality, what would you say? This is a term we throw around rather loosely today. We label someone a legalist in the same way Senator Joe McCarthy called people Communists, hardly knowing quite what the term really means or whether it genuinely does apply. To define legalism is rather difficult; it is about like trying to define a Republican these days. I've tried to think this matter through and came to this definition:

Legality is an attempt to control outward actions by means of rules, enforced by penalty.

Traffic laws are a good example of this. Here is a sign that says, 25 Miles Per Hour Speed Limit, and you are

going 35. Now you are up against a rule that governs your outward actions. You can go past that sign with your heart filled with bitterness about the whole matter of traffic control, but as long as you keep under 25 miles an hour the law will leave you alone. The law is only interested in controlling your outward actions, but if you fail, there is a penalty. The man in blue will be right behind you with his little siren, and you will be handed a citation. That is a good example of legality.

Income tax is another one. If you do not have your tax in by April 15th there is a penalty attached. The government does not care whether you like it or not. You are required to fill out that form, and you are asked to get it in by a certain time. All this is simply the natural, the normal way of controlling the actions of human beings.

Then what is the definition of grace? Well,

Grace is the control of inward attitudes and outward actions by means of love, without any penalty.

If you want an illustration of that, ask yourself what makes a young man bring his sweetheart an armful of flowers, or a box of candy. If she asked him to do it, it would ruin the whole business, wouldn't it? If he were under obligation to do so, it would be a meaningless act. But something so controls his actions that, when the right circumstances arise, he gladly digs down in his pocket for the money and brings her the flowers, or a box of candy. He does not have to do it, but he does. Why? Well, there is love there. Grace, you see, controls by love.

GRACE APPEALS TO LOVE:

Let us look at these matters a little closer. Legality deals with outward actions or words, while grace deals with inward attitudes and motives of the heart. It is possible for man to obey the law outwardly but disobey it inwardly. A man could stand with a brick in his hand in front of a plate glass window with his heart hot with hatred and with a great surging desire to throw that brick through the window. As long as he does not throw it, the law is totally unconcerned how he feels. As long as he controls his actions, the law does not care what his heart feels like. But grace does! Grace is vitally concerned with the heart. Grace wants that heart to be filled with love and benevolence, instead of hatred and bitterness, and so its control is from within.

- Law deals with the surface; grace with the center.
- Law appeals to fear, fear of a penalty; grace appeals to grateful love.
- Law prescribes what one ought to do; grace creates a "want to" within.

It is significant, isn't it, that we all prefer grace for ourselves, but law for everyone else? But the work of the Spirit is to teach us to show grace toward others as well as desire it for ourselves. The Scriptures confirm that it is a natural thing to be legal. The natural man needs law to control his actions. If he does not have the law to tell him what to do, he will go overboard and be lawless, and the result is anarchy and rebellion. The natural man needs law. I'm not saying anything against law; it is necessary; but, it is for the natural man.

Let me give you a passage of Scripture that confirms that. You will find it in First Timothy, Chapter 1, Verses 8-11. Paul says,

But we know that the law is good, if a man uses it lawfully, knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine; according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust. {1 Tim 1:8-11 KJV}

Now, the regenerate man, the man or woman, boy or girl who has come to believe in Jesus Christ, who has come into a living relationship with him, and in whom the Spirit of God dwells is not to be governed by the

Law. The Law is not made for him. We who know Christ are to be controlled by grace in every aspect of life. In Romans 7:6, Paul writes:

But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter. {Rom 7:6 KJV}

That makes it clear, doesn't it? We are not to be under the Law. Paul repeats this, with different emphasis, in Galatians 4:9:

But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? {Gal 4:9 KJV}

Paul asks, "Why are you going back under Law now that you have been brought out into the liberty that is Christ Jesus?" The Word of God makes it very plain that a Christian is to be controlled by grace and not by Law.

Unfortunately, there are many misunderstandings about the practical applications of grace to a Christian life. I want to treat some of the most common of these in a simple, practical manner:

Perhaps the misunderstanding that is most prevalent today is that grace really means no control at all. Many, I think, would sing to the old hymn something like this:

Free from law, Oh happy condition,
Sin as you please,
for there is remission.

Their idea is that you can do anything you want in grace: If you are under grace you do not have any restrictions; you do not have any rules or any regulations; you just do as you please, and nothing can stop you. Since you will be forgiven, you may feel free to live it up all your life. This is a most common misunderstanding of grace, but it is one that is far from the truth.

In a Christian life there are two extremes:

- Legality, and
- License,

and the devil does not really care which one he pushes you into. If he can get you into either one, your life is ruined as far as usefulness for God is concerned. But grace represents the middle path that goes right down between the two.

License is lawlessness; it is anarchy; it is saying "I'm free to do anything I want, there are no limits to my indulgence. If I want to do something that the Bible says is wrong, well I'm not under the Law, but under grace, and I can go ahead and do it." That is license and it is wrong. It is religious anarchy. And there are some who feel that this is what grace is.

At the other extreme there is legality. Our trouble is that to escape license sometimes we rebound into legality. We feel the condemnation of conscience that comes with living a wild, free, untrammled life, and we react with legality. Instead of coming to a mediate position of grace, we go clear over to the side of legality. We impose on ourselves laws, rigid rules, long lists of "don'ts" which prevent us from doing anything but eat, sleep, and read the Bible. Have you seen the sign?

"Everything I like is either immoral, illegal, or fattening!"

Well, that is legality.

GRACE HAS ITS COMMANDS:

Now grace represents real control. It is control from within, not from the outside only. It is a middle path between legality and license. A man said to me the other day.

"Since I began to learn what grace means, I watch not only my actions, but my thoughts as well. I have a much greater sense of sin under grace than I ever had under law."

Surely this indicates how much more control grace exerts than law. The fact is that since grace is concerned with the thoughts as well as the actions, it can prevent wrong actions at the very source -- the thought life.

A second widespread misunderstanding exists along with this. Many feel that grace is so opposed to Law that it never involves any commands or rules of any kind. I read somewhere recently that wherever you find commandments in the Bible, that is law, and, if you live by grace, you cannot have any laws or rules of any kind. You sometimes hear people say, "I'm under grace, I don't need any rules in my life." And if you refer to some rule they rebel, and say, "That's not for me. I'm under grace; I'm not subject to any rules." Now the Bible indicates plainly that grace has its rules as well. Grace gives commands. Let me refer you to some of them:

- Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you," {John 15:12 RSV}. Now that is a command of grace.
- The Bible says, "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together," {cf, Heb 10:25}. That is a command, but it is given under grace.
- The Bible says, "Be not drunk with wine," {Eph 5:18 KJV}. That is a command, but it is grace!
- The Scripture exhorts, "Pay taxes to whom taxes are due," {cf, Rom 13:6-7}. That is a command, but it is grace!

Grace has its commands just as truly as Law does.

LAW CREATES REBELLION:

"Then," you say, "what is the difference between law and grace?" The difference is that the law commands without supplying a motive to obey. In fact, it creates a feeling of rebellion within.

I don't know whether you react like this or not, but I do. Whenever I see a sign that says "Keep Off The Grass," I have an urge to walk across it. Do you feel that way? There is created immediately a sense of rebellion: "Why should I keep off the grass?" I resent being told not to walk on it. I do not do it, because I know I will get into trouble, but I would like to. Now that is law. It is a command without creating a desire to comply. Grace commands even a higher thing than Law, but also creates an ability and desire to comply with the demand.

I saw a "Keep Off The Grass" sign some time ago that was gracious: It was not merely the usual, blunt "Keep Off The Grass." Right in the middle of a beautiful, newly planted spot, green with new grass, was this sign that said simply, "Please Give Me A Chance!" That is grace. No one would walk on that grass. It appealed to the instinct for the underdog in every human heart. It created a sentiment for fair play, "Let's give it a chance." That is grace.

One sign was as much a command as the other, but the second awakened a desire within to comply with it, and so was gracious.

Remember that grace has its commands, it has its rules, it has its regulations -- exactly as the Law does -- but grace alone has the ability to create a desire to comply.

A LEGALIST CATALOG OF SINS:

There is yet a third misunderstanding: This is a very common one and a very serious one. It is the thinking that

says the standards of grace are much lower than the standards of legalism. The argument goes something like this, in various forms: "True Christians," someone says, "never use tobacco, or dance, or go to the movies, or go to the theater, or gamble, or drink. And since you sometimes see those who say they are living by grace do some of these things, it therefore proves the standards of grace are lower than those of the Law."

Actually, the reverse is true. In the light of the Word of God, which alone must set the standards for believers, these outward acts -- smoking, drinking, dancing, movies, theater, gambling, etc. -- are much less serious sin, if they are sin at all, than the inward, vicious sins of the spirit that legalists almost invariably permit in their own lives. Legal standards always concern themselves with outward acts. As long as you can keep the outward aspect of your life adjusted to a particular rule or standard, you can consider yourself spiritual. But grace does not stop there. Grace goes beyond the outward act into the heart, and says the heart must be right as well. The spirit must be righteous in God's sight. The standards of grace are concerned with those inward attitudes that create the outward act.

Recently I read a paragraph which manifests a keen insight into this problem, by Dr. Carl Henry, for many years Professor of Theology at Fuller Seminary. Hear these words carefully, for he deals with this in a very practical way:

The legalist's catalog of sins is small and specific: commercial movies, dancing, gambling, card playing, drinking beer or wine or liquor, and smoking. No spiritual Christian will presumably do any of these things, and generally will have little to do with anyone who does them. Everyone who grows up in this tradition finds that it has a vice-like grip on him. His conscience has been made sensitive to these things by the never-ending tirade against them. If he weakens and indulges, he is filled with guilt feelings as automatically as Pavlov's dog salivated when the bell rang. Many valid arguments can be marshaled against some of these practices. A thoughtful analysis of all factors involved may lead a person to abstain from smoking. He may not like the taste of a cigarette. The smoke may bother his wife. He may not be able to afford the cost. Or he may wish to use the money for some other purpose. He may not like the looks of a person smoking. He may be aware that others around him are sickened by the foulness of his wet cigar. He may not like the smell of tobacco clinging to his clothing. He may not like the possibility of staining his teeth. For any of these reasons he may choose not to smoke. But this is a wholly different story from condemning smoking as sin because -- well, because it's sin, that's all. And from the presupposition that it is sin, the legalists will use the above reasons to prove that indeed it is sin. The answer to its moral rightness is already in mind before investigation of the moral issues is made.

Now that is in no sense an attempt to justify smoking, or drinking, or gambling, or any of these other things. It is simply an attempt to put the emphasis where it belongs, not on outward acts, primarily, but on inward attitudes and the signs of the spirit that are far worse in the sight of God.

I had a young man from another church come to me a few weeks ago. He had in his hand a pledge that his church had asked him to sign before he became a member. The pledge said: "I promise never to use tobacco in any form, or to drink liquor, or to attend the movies or the theater, or to gamble, or to play cards" -- and there were several other things that were there. He said, "My church has asked me to sign this before I become a member. Should I sign or not?" I said, "Yes, sign it. But write on it after the words that are printed there: "I reserve the right to be jealous, gossip, slander, be hypocritical and proud, and indulge in all the other sins of the saints."

That is where the real sin lies. Read your New Testament and you will find that gossip, evil talk and a bitter spirit are far worse sins in God's sight than any of the outward acts that may be evil as well. We must put the emphasis where it belongs.

The Ten Commandments represent only the minimum standard for moral living. They say nothing about evangelism or missionary effort. There is no life or walk in the Spirit; there is no Fatherhood of God; there is no union with Christ; there is no fellowship with saints; there is no hope of salvation or hope of heaven in the Ten Commandments. All those things are brought in under grace. The standards under grace are far, far higher than those under Law. Grace speaks thus:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and evil speaking be put away from

you, with all malice, and be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. (Eph 4:31-2 {KJV})

Legalism can never rise to that level. It is only concerned with a few outward things, visible to others, but the heart may be rank and evil with slander, malice, bitterness, gossip, and all the other works of the flesh.

Our Lord Jesus gave a perfect picture of a legalist when he said to the Pharisees of his day, "Ye strain at a gnat but swallow a camel," {Matt 23:24 KJV}. "You are so concerned with these minor, outward things, but you let the great and weighty matters of the spirit go by without a thought." That is legalism.

Another common objection to grace is that grace is much harder to apply to life than Law. Strangely enough this is an objection that is true. It does take more time and effort to be gracious than to gruffly say, "Don't!" to someone. Any parent knows that. It is a lot easier to say "Stop that!" and keep saying it for fifteen or twenty years than it is to sit down and explain why an action should be stopped, what the harm is, what is going to happen if it is continued, or to help a child to see what is involved in the whole matter. Sure, it takes time. "Don't!" and "Stop that!" work fine for a while, as long as the penalty is consistently invoked, but inwardly the heart may all along be seething with rebellion.

One mother kept saying to her little boy, "Sit down!" but he wouldn't sit down. Finally, she went over and got him and sat him down in the chair by force. Rebelliously, he looked up at her and said, "I may be sitting down outside, but I'm still standing up inside!"

DISCIPLINE WITH UNDERSTANDING:

The trouble is that when control by force is no longer possible, the lid blows off! When children are out on their own, the first thing they want to do is the thing they have been forbidden to do all their lives. I do not mean by this that discipline of children is wrong. It is most assuredly right. But it must be discipline with understanding, and the manifestation of love and concern. Love may sometimes use force, but it will never be content with the use of force without creating some realization of why force is necessary. Grace takes time and patience to apply. Control comes slowly and there may even be temporary failure along the line. But when children are out on their own who have been taught grace, there is a lasting and solid commitment to the right that will keep them straight all their days.

Grace does require time, and, above all, it requires sacrifice. That is the heart of grace. You must give of yourself. You cannot win love by buying a few gifts now and then, or saying a few kind words once in a while. I have exhorted some who came to me with problems about their teenage children to try grace in controlling their lives when law has been shown to be a failure. I have been amused when they come back in a week or so, and say, "It doesn't work; I was nice to him for two or three days and he still behaves as badly as ever."

That is much like the man who says to his wife when she asks him for some money, "Well, what did you do with the ten dollars I gave you last year?"

No, grace must take time to create love, because it is love that controls. Until you have created that attitude of love in the heart, you cannot possibly expect the result you want. But the results in terms of obedience and direction are well worth all it costs.

LEGALISM IS SIN:

There is still one final misunderstanding. This is the idea that it is quite optional whether a Christian lives by Law or grace. That is, if grace is found too difficult or demanding, the Lord will accept sincere legalism. Nothing could be further from the truth. Legalism is sin! If you discover it in your heart, you ought to be down on your face before God repenting and confessing the thing. It is corrupting; it is vile; it is disturbing; it destroys the unity of the Spirit and produces the works of the flesh in your life.

Paul calls it leaven, and he treats it as evil in the extreme. Ignorance of grace is called weakness in the

Scripture. Such a one is expected to grow, to develop, and learn something better. But a deliberate failure to live under grace when you know better, is called falling from grace. It is called deceit; it is called vain jangling; it is called empty talk. You are considered unruly and disobedient as Christians. We could sum it all up by simply saying it is impossible to please God by legality. He can be pleased only by grace. We are called to grace. Paul says "Sin shall not have dominion over you, because you are not under law but under grace," (cf, Rom. 6:14). Peter says, "Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," (2 Pet. 3:18 {KJV}).

Now I come to the last thing, briefly and quickly. It is the supreme illustration of grace. There are many illustrations that we could use, but the greatest illustration of grace is spread right out before us at the Lord's Table. The Lord's Table speaks of nothing but grace.

For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich. (2 Cor 8:9 {KJV})

That is what this table proclaims. It tells how grace has already given all for us. Before we even asked, God gave. While we were yet rebels, Christ died. We are invited to come, just as we are. God does not ask us to clean up our lives, nor to improve ourselves. He asks us to come just as we are. Guilty and filthy and stained with sin; righteous in act without, but rebellious of heart within. Come and receive the gift of love and righteousness he desires to impart. That is grace. There is no need to struggle to be accepted before God today. When you believe in Jesus Christ it is written over against your name in heaven: *Accepted in the Beloved!* Welcomed in Christ! Already cleansed, already righteous in his sight!

Grace is flowing like a river,
Millions there have been supplied.
Still it flows, as fresh as ever,
>From the Saviour's wounded side!

The appeal of grace now that God has made you saints is: Live saintly! Now that he has accepted you and made you fellow-heirs with Christ, joint heirs with the Son of God, live like it, walk like it! The heart that receives such a gift is constrained by love to honor it. I like the way it is stated in First Corinthians, Chapter 6, where Paul says,

What, know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price? Therefore [because all this is true] glorify God in your body and in your spirit which are His. {cf, 1 Cor 6:19-20 KJV}

Now if that were the Law it would read: "Glorify God in your body and in your spirit and someday you will become the temples of God." But grace turns it all around and says, by grace, without merit, without any claim, without any reason why, God has made you a temple of the living God. Now, if you realize that, live accordingly. Glorify God in your body and in your spirit. We could never do it the other way; we could never glorify God apart from the indwelling Spirit, but grace says it's done, it's already accomplished. Ye are the temples of the living God. The man or woman, boy or girl, who grasps this great fact in its living splendor will never be the same again.

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for the riches of grace we have in Christ Jesus. How marvelously he has already given himself for us. You have bade us to be tenderhearted, kind, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us. We pray that our hearts may be awakened to the riches of grace and that we may be stimulated to do the very things that are pleasing to you. not because we have to but because we want to. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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