

INTRODUCTION

The more we truly want to do right—and fail—the heavier our guilt feels. It grows far beyond a time-specific reality and becomes a dark atmosphere under which we live. Self-condemnation and self-reproach oppress us with unbearable weight. Our wrongdoing feels, somehow, like a special case of failure.

Why is it so difficult to accept the forgiveness we know Jesus offers to us? Why does regret about our past sometimes steal away hope for our future?

Most Christians assume that those guilt feelings and threats about eternity come from God. But do they? When we can't explain the anxious feelings of dread, guilt or self-reproach, there may be far more going on than just a discussion with ourselves. The voice we hear may not be our own—or God's.

Might there be a sinister presence, an insubstantial but very real entity in our minds, whispering falsehoods and challenging the truth of God's word?

I believe, sometimes, there is.

CHAPTER 1: THE SPIRIT OF THE PHARISEE

The man I encountered on the steps of Pastor George's church was manipulated by an evil-spirited foe, and he was propagating that false god's catechism. He was a zealous evangelist for a god-who-is-no-god. Heedless of my answers, and Pastor George's attempts to move him away (so I could get into the church to start teaching), the prophet of *legalism* grew increasingly adamant in his demand, "You must teach the people about the judgment of God!"

With a look of rage and disgust, he pointed at the sanctuary I was attempting to reach and exclaimed, "There is sin in this church!"

The guy had a point—not the one Jesus wants to press foremost into our hearts, but an undeniable point, nonetheless: We do have sin in our lives! The ongoing wrongness in our lives produces deep condemnation and worrisome anxiety that we may have crossed some invisible line, taxing God's grace beyond its limits.

When we knowingly walk off the path into sin's wasteland—when we allow bitterness to take root; when we crave what isn't ours; when we lie, cheat or steal; when we take *that* drink or flip through *that* magazine or fantasize about *that* scenario—when we do wrong, what then? What do we do? What does God do?

CHAPTER 2: LEGALISM AND THE TRAP

The fierce man who accosted me that evening in Greece was confused and animated by an evil-spirited distortion masquerading as spiritual orthodoxy. His distortions, though extreme, reminded me just how confusing it can be to navigate between the Law and Grace—and why the Church struggles to find the balance between *legalism* and *license*.

Even if you have never heard the railings of an angry crusader from northern Europe, you have heard the merciless and disapproving tone of the “*spirit of the Pharisee*” in your own mind. It wears a religious mask. Its mistruths sound holy, profound, and right. But they are not. Buried beneath the religious exterior of its heresies, you will always discover condemnation and a terrible burden.

We have no defense against accusations of sin. We are sinners. And so, our souls scramble in dismay like cadets under surprise review, knowing their living quarters are not ready for inspection. *Oh no*, our hearts wail, *If judgment comes today, we know our house is not in order. What can we do?*

My encounter with the messenger from the “*spirit of the Pharisee*” lasted no more than four or five minutes—just long enough to remind me of religion’s stale aftertaste. He was on a mission of misery, not a mission of mercy. Instead of the dimensionless love of God, he spoke of impending judgment, as though it was the first and most important item on God’s agenda.

Actually, judgment is the last thing on God’s mind.

CHAPTER 3: A FORCE AND A FLOOD

Unfortunately, many believers find the Old Testament too long to read, thoroughly. They tend to read it in small segments, considering only tiny portions at a time. That leads them to several misconceptions about the nature of God and the basis upon which He relates to His people.

When people only read small sections of the Old Testament at a time—and don’t grasp the entire story—they miss the simple truth that God’s judgments always include promises. When He passes sentence, and renders a verdict of guilty, He is NOT finished with us. God uses judgment to change people and their destiny. It is *not*, primarily, punishment for past behavior, but prelude for future blessing.

No prophet received revelation about more severe judgment than Noah did. His message-from-God was the greatest condemnation and consequence ever to befall our race. But when God declared the end of the world, He simultaneously made a promise for its future. God told Noah about impending judgment, but He also told Noah to build the Ark.

What conclusion do you come to as a result of believing those guilty feelings that plague you? Don’t they tell you it is too late and that all is lost? Or that God gave you a chance to be different, but you

blew the opportunity? The bottom line is that they threaten you with the most horrific and grievous possibility your soul can imagine: *God gives up on you.*

CHAPTER 4: PROMISES AND COMMANDS

The “*spirit of the Pharisee*” blinds us to God’s earliest history with humankind. It tries to convince us that God initiated relationship with us using commands and rules for conduct. He did not. As we will see, commandments have never defined God’s connection with our race. Our ancestors’ future well-being was always the result of God’s promises—and their belief in those promises.

Unless we grasp how fundamentally dissimilar commands and promises are from one another, we won’t understand why God’s promise to forgive is weightier than our failure to obey. A promise from God is like a taxi in Athens. Regardless of my personal ability to navigate the drive to the Acropolis in a car of my own, the taxi will get me there. Calling someone a good or bad driver when they aren’t driving is meaningless.

Isn’t much of the guiltiness you feel mostly about your failure to live up to a standard of obedience? It seems so right, doesn’t it, to presume that you have lost connection with God because separation from God is the just desserts for “bad” Christians? But those feelings are based on a terrible and unscriptural notion: “If I am a good person, God will love me more; if I am bad, He will love me less.”

God loves us unconditionally. He doesn’t evaluate our goodness and love us corresponding to how well we behave. Those who attempt to maintain intimate connection to God exclusively by keeping His commands will be sorely disappointed.

CHAPTER 5: A REMNANT AND A RECKONING

Unfortunately, our lack of understanding about true, spiritual judgment leaves us more vulnerable than we need to be to those guilty feelings that sometimes hang around after we confess and repent of our behavior. Read your Bible carefully, and you will see judgment and deliverance are companions, not disconnected activities. Neither mercy-without-judgment nor judgment-without-mercy are God’s plan.

The “*spirit of the Pharisee*” lies and tells us to work harder at being more obedient to the Law. We promise God we “will never do those things again,” because we mistakenly believe that our hope for mercy is tied to our obedience. It isn’t.

God “reckons” things differently than humans do, and that difference keeps tripping us up. Most of us—especially those of us who sincerely want to be “more” righteous—assume that righteousness is determined by behavior: the more that we act correctly and avoid doing anything wrong, the more righteous we presume we are. But in God’s mind, righteousness is determined by what we believe, not how we behave.

This is a game-changer.

By His Creator-right and power, God decreed that righteousness comes “on the basis of faith” in His promises. We are a remnant through believing—not obeying. Our access to God and passing forever out of judgment is through promises—not commands. The “*spirit of the Pharisee*” is a liar because it insists that the only sure way into God’s favor is by better behavior and a more spotless track record.

CHAPTER 6: CUTTING AWAY AND FALLING AWAY

The Old Testament continually communicates the theme of human failure. But overriding human waywardness stands a grander message: God’s unending, affectionate graciousness toward prone-to-wander people—His mercy matching, stride for stride, every errant step they take.

God invites us to read Old Testament episodes not merely for an accurate glimpse of history, but also to extract understandings about the invisible realm. One such example is circumcision—the unusual mark that many believers associate almost exclusively with Moses and the Law. Abraham received and believed the promise before he was circumcised. Therefore, circumcision is the sign of God’s promises, not His commands, a reminder of God’s promise to credit righteousness by faith, not by works of our flesh.

Unbelief holds more peril than disobedience. There is a good reason why we call ourselves *believers* not *obeyers*.

The Enemy capitalizes on the fear that sinfulness will cause us to “fall away” from God. But the “fallen” are not those who have fallen into sin, but those who have fallen from complete reliance on grace. “Falling from grace” is buying into the lie that closeness to God is secured by either (1) the smallness/infrequency of our sin, or (2) the sufficiency of our sacrifice (i.e., penance, remorse), plus an adequate level of future obedience.

Legalism tempts us to discard God’s grace for our own works. People who use obedience to the Law as either the means for or the proof of their justification unintentionally abandon grace. They substitute their promises for God’s.

CHAPTER 7: A DELIVERER AND A LAW-GIVER

Most of us know the burning bush story. But after Moses agreed to deliver God’s message to Pharaoh, God sought “to put him to death.” Moses had not circumcised his son. Long before he received the Law of commandments, Moses had to understand that the Law of commands did NOTHING to alter the law of faith. The law of *faith/belief*, introduced through Abraham, is older than the law of *commands/behavior*, introduced through Moses.

I am fully aware of heresies trying to worm their way into Jesus' Church, but I do not want to address one off-base teaching (license) with another (legalism). I'm not telling you God is too loving to judge or punish. He cannot simply ignore or excuse sin, because it has the power to destroy everything He creates. God is completely for us, but completely against our sin. He is both our Advocate and our Judge.

How could God remain just and righteous while rescuing a sinful people? God didn't change the justness of His character in order to find us innocent; nor did He change the facts in our cases. He simply changed the "law" under which we were tried. If we were tried under the law of Moses, we could only be found guilty. So, after shutting "everyone under sin," (Galatians 3:22) and declaring us universally "disobedient" under the law of *behavior*, He chose to try our case under the "law of *faith*," "apart from works of the Law," so that "He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26).

CHAPTER 8: "FAITH WITHOUT WORKS"

God's judgment in our present life is like parenting: correcting our kids' attitudes isn't the same as cutting them out of our will. The whole point of such guidance is to get them into their future—well tooled, well trained, and well situated. He disciplines us with earthly consequences because we are His legitimate offspring. It expresses His love, not His wrath. It is developing us, not damning us.

According to the Book of James, "faith without works is dead." But what sort of works? Legalists imply that works of faith are ethical accomplishments and reasonably good behavior. In other words, synonymous with works of Law. Which commands did Abraham or Rahab obey? What Law or point of morality were they following by their "works" highlighted in the Book of James? Quite simply, none.

Works of faith are responses to promises, not commands. They are a consequence of putting our trust for the future in God's hands; they are not successful attempts to always align our behaviors with God's commands.

The New Covenant does not erase the commands, just the record of our disobedience from our trial before the Eternity Court. Sins we commit over the course of our life do, I suppose, get added to the record of violations. I know for certain that my list grows ever longer. But no power in the universe will ever pry loose the spikes with which that ever-lengthening register was hammered to the Cross. It may grow longer, but it's never coming off to condemn me.

CHAPTER 9: WHY THE LAW?

Most believers view the Law as an act of frustration, written when God lost His temper. That misconception sets believers on the wrong trajectory for understanding how the Law and Grace work together. So, what good did God intend through the Law?

1. The Law Protected Humanity from Being Overwhelmed by the sin-force. God used the Law to restrain an unchecked tide of evil from completely engulfing humanity.
2. The Law distinguished God's people from all others. Because He gave the Law to His children of promise, not to every nation, the Law identified God's people as His people.
3. The Law taught people how to live bountifully. God's Law gave His people extraordinary insights into life.
4. The Law provided a detailed register of sins. God gave the Law to point out "lawless and rebellious" deeds, and to fortify humankind's conscience so that it could better distinguish right from wrong.
5. The Law pronounced everyone guilty. The Law leveled the playing field, making Law-breakers of all. It expanded everyone's awareness of wrong in their lives.
6. The Law introduced sacrifice for sin. Of all the advantages the Law gave to humanity, the foremost is also the most easily forgotten—or never noticed.

If we remove sacrifice for sins from the Law, we strip it of mercy and atonement. We shrink the Law of Moses to penalties and punishment—the elixir of false prophets and heretics who follow the teachings of the "*spirit of the Pharisee*."

CHAPTER 10: A PROPHECY, A COPY AND A FORGERY

Jesus didn't abolish the Law; He fulfilled it. How? Jesus fulfills the whole Law just like He fulfills other prophecies in the Prophets or the Psalms. That's why He chided the Pharisees, "If you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me." Philip told Nathanael, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote..." (John 1:45). The whole Law is one big prophecy; it perfectly foreshadows Christ as the "one sacrifice for sins for all time."

The Law is also "a copy of heavenly things (i.e., spiritual substances and dimensions)." But no matter how precise a reflection of spiritual righteousness, the Law of Moses is still just a copy. As righteous as the Law is, it remains "a mere shadow of what is to come." In today's language, the Law was made on a copy machine.

Plus, it's an incomplete copy. Coming more than 400 years after the promise of righteousness by faith, the temporary jurisdiction God gave to the *law of behavior* never replaced the jurisdiction of the *law of belief*.

Legalism creates lingering self-reproach. It urges us to right our wrongs by pointing a condemning finger—at our sinner-selves. But when we "pass judgment," even against ourselves, we transform ourselves from a confessing defendant into a condemning judge. Self-condemnation is neither a confession of wrongdoing, nor a plea for mercy. It is counterfeit religion, a false doctrine taught by the "*spirit of the Pharisee*." Self-condemnation is an act of self-righteousness.

CHAPTER 11: CONVICTION, CONDEMNATION AND WEED-CHOPPING

When feeling badly about our sin turns into a lingering sense of unworthiness and self-reproach, something is very, very wrong with how we think about righteousness. *Doesn't godly sorrow cause us to feel regret?* Yes, it does, but there is a world of difference between conviction and condemnation. Godly sorrow motivates us to change future behavior; the “*spirit of the Pharisee*” immobilizes us with shame for past behavior.

Christ didn't make the Law irrelevant. Rather, He pinpointed a far more difficult measure of righteousness than anything the Pharisees understood. Sin is not a surface issue. Like a hoe chopping at weeds, the Law doesn't cut deep enough to get at the roots of sin. Though seemingly harsh and unforgiving, *legalism* actually tempts us with a far more, lax standard: “You are only guilty if you (physically) commit the sin.” With one false stroke, it eliminates a wide swath of sin because wrong-spirited attitudes, imaginings, and fantasies don't get tallied.

Equating internal-sins to external-sins is not giving license for people to live out their fantasies. The real issue that confronts every person is how to become righteous inside and out. To the extent that we gauge how well we are doing in our walk of faith primarily by our behavior, we drift dangerously close to the teaching of the Pharisees.

The Law never got to the roots of our sin. Jesus replaces the Law as the means by which we are made righteous before God. Hence, He “is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Romans 10:4).

CHAPTER 12: THE TUTOR, THE TEST AND THE TWIN

Knowing that His children do not naturally understand matters of spiritual life and eternity, God assigned the Law of Moses to coach us for the *Final Exam of Life*. You did know, didn't you, that life has a *Final Exam*? Our answers determine our eternity. Thankfully, the *Test* is short, and easy—with just two, non-essay questions. In virtually every case, the answer people give to Question #1 (*Are you guilty?*) is the answer they supply to Question #2. Question #1 is a total setup for Question #2 (“*Do you want to be forgiven?*”) because God's plan has always been to extend Grace to people who acknowledge their guilt.

Do you ever feel like you have an evil twin—someone who looks like you but actually is *Another-you* inside? What other explanation can you offer? You love God, and you don't know why you do what you do (Romans 7:15). As incredible as it sounds, an evil twin inhabits the same space as you.

Before you were born again, there was one of you. Now there are two of you. God never confuses *New-you* with *Old-you*. *Old-you* was “dead in trespasses” and cursed by Adam's disobedience, so there never was any hope for *Other-you* to reconcile with God. *New-you* is “alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

Old-me will always be a sinner. But just as Jesus never sinned, neither does *New-me* because “it is no longer I [*Twin-me*] who lives, but Christ lives in *Me-me*; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved *New-me* and gave Himself up for *Me-me*.”

Real-me. Forever-me. Never-to-sin-or-die-again-me.

CHAPTER 13: GOOD BYE TO THE DEAD, OLD GUY

The truth is that even the most, sincere follower of Christ will struggle with—and sometimes lose the tug-of-war against—*Flesh*. Before we came to Christ, we were like Siamese Twins, joined together with *Flesh* from birth. In the joined-together condition, we shared the same fate as our *Twin*. But when we received Christ as Savior, God performed a spiritual operation to separate one twin from the other. Though *Flesh-you* is dead, *Spirit-you* lives, thanks to Christ’s righteousness.

The “*spirit of the Pharisee*” does not accept *Two-me* people. Though God, Himself, is convicting and changing you from the inside out, *Legalism* insists that you need to assist God’s inner work in your soul with works inspired by the Law of Moses. Any effort to attain righteousness must be accomplished by *Flesh-me* working harder to discipline wayward impulses. Born-again, redeemed, and on-their-way-to-Heaven people like us get taken prisoner by the very evil we hate in our life. Satan, the *sin-force*, and *Flesh-me* conspire against *Spiritual-me*, but they lost the “power of death” over my spirit when Christ died in my stead. Though *Old-me* is completely sinful, I am completely freed from judgment, guilt and condemnation through Jesus Christ. God’s grace-and-judgment separated me from my uncleanness, so I wouldn’t die in it. Christ condemned the sin that would have condemned me; He put to death the death that would have killed me.

Old-me was crucified with Christ—and died. *New-me* has risen from the grave, totally “freed from sin,” never to die as penalty for sin.