

Ways We Try to Fix Ourselves

From: Overcoming the Overwhelming:
A 40-Day Journey toward Rediscovering Faith in God

Taken from Day 3: Not By Law
by C. D. Hildebrand

Grace, not law, is the way of the Christian's life. We were saved by grace through faith, not by keeping the law, and we live by grace through faith, not by keeping laws. We also overcome overwhelming situations by grace through faith, not law.

We usually think of laws as a list of do's and don'ts, and yes, those are laws, but law takes on many other deceptive forms that I'd like to point out in this chapter. It is important to identify these things because, as I showed in the last chapter, Paul wrote, "The strength (dunamis) of sin is the law." Even though it is likely that an overwhelming situation doesn't involve sin per se, **if law is employed as the method of solving your problem, it will only make matters worse.** We were born again into the kingdom of God's grace through faith in Jesus, and that is how we are created to function— not through applying law.

Blame and Shame

Law can take on a variety of forms. Here are a few that you have likely experienced. First of all, there are blame and shame. "It's all your fault," or "You should be ashamed of yourself for letting this situation get so out of hand." We can say this to ourselves, or we might hear it from others.

Accusations and condemnation are not helpful. In fact, they are contrary to the life God has for us. Think about it. Who is the "accuser of the brethren", and who "accuses the saints night and day before God" (Rev. 12:10)? Accusations are NOT from God. They are not meant to help but to defeat.

Shame is not from your Father either. In fact, even if your situation is your fault, your sins are forgiven, and He remembers them no more (Heb. 8:12). If He remembers them no more, do you

really think he is endlessly reminding you or punishing you for them? He most certainly is not!

Sometimes our overwhelming situations involve someone else. Might we be allowing blame and shame to come from our corner to the person who is offending us? Think about it. God has extended His grace, mercy, and kindness to us. Shouldn't we do the same for our offenders?¹ Blame and shame are 100% counter-productive when it comes to resolving any situation. God might indeed correct our thinking and behavior as we go through the process of overcoming the overwhelming, but He will not shame us.

Here is something that helps distinguish between condemnation and correction. Condemnation is a dead-end street. It is like a final sentence of judgment. There is nothing you can do to fix the situation when you are condemned. Correction from God, however, while sometimes painful (no one likes to be told that what he thinks or does is wrong), offers hope and peace—and a solution.

Formula Living

Probably the most common form of law is the one I mentioned in previous chapters—formula living (also known as Plans A–Z).

“Do this, and your problem will be solved.” “This” can be one thing or an ever-increasing list of things. The list usually consists of both practical and “spiritual” solutions. The clear implication is that if we do this list, things will go well with us, but if we don't do the list, our lives will fall apart, and of course, this is our fault. So when our lives are falling apart, we are obviously not doing the list, and if we would just do the list, things would get better. This type of law can become a dizzying, endless circle of despair.

Formula living is a reflection of the blessings and curses of the law—obey the law completely, and these blessings will come upon you and overtake you; disobey the law and these curses will come your way (Deut. 28). Many Christians today live as if they are under the law of Moses instead of grace and faith. Or they try combining both the Old and New Covenants. However, the Law of Moses is the Old Covenant (Deut. 4:13), and the Old Covenant is obsolete (Heb. 8:13). Christians are under *only one* covenant, and that is the New

Covenant. Even so, the Christian world today not only obligates Christians to be guided by the moral law of the Old Covenant but adds new laws which they call “disciplines”.

The clear but mistaken communication is that these practices are required for successful Christian living, and not keeping them will result in living below what God has for us. Often when someone goes in for counseling, they will be asked, “Have you been praying and reading your Bible?” This question trivializes the person’s situation and sidelines his distress because the assumption is if someone isn’t reading his Bible and praying, then this is the root cause of one’s troubles—counseling session over, just go home, pray, and read your Bible, and everything will work out just fine. Excuse me for using caps and boldface in the same sentence, but

**WE LIVE BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH;
NOT BY PRAYER AND BIBLE READING.**

Behavior Modification

Another evidence of law is that of behavior modification. Let me say that behavior modification can bring results, but doesn’t always involve a change of heart, just of behavior. So, one might reach his goal of eliminating a certain behavior in his life, but deep inside he is still longing to do it. The law can motivate us to change our actions by the fear of punishment or the promise of reward, but only grace can change our hearts and thus our desires. The alcoholic redeemed or not redeemed can stop drinking using a variety of techniques, **but only God’s grace can make an alcoholic into someone who is *no longer an alcoholic at all*.**

Some don’t even believe it is possible for an alcoholic to be completely free—to rid himself of saying, “I am an alcoholic,” for the—rest—of—his—life but we personally know those who are living in this freedom who were previously convinced that they would “always be an alcoholic”. Likewise, a person can put himself on a strict low-calorie diet, and he will lose weight, but until the person is healed of whatever it is that is causing him to be overweight (whether physical or emotional), the likely next step will be that the dieter will gain it all back. This is true of children as well. We can modify their behavior by using reward and punishment, but any

parent knows the difference between a child whose heart *wants* to please and the heart of a child who is forced to obey.

New Year's Resolutions

Each year, millions of people participate in what can be a futile exercise called New Year's Resolutions. I used to love that time right before the New Year because it was almost like a cleansing from all the ways I'd fallen short in the past year. I'd get out my new journal and write down each goal. I'd put them in categories such as Spiritual, Personal, Family, and Ministry. Each category would contain my deepest desire and how I'd go about it, yet little progress was ever made. Usually, I just felt guilty that I'd accomplished so little, but as the next year would draw near, I'd be right back at making my new list (which usually looked very similar to the previous list). "This year," I'd tell myself, "I am going to make some changes," but then "life" would happen and the list would fade away.

This can result in an endless cycle and eventually a sense of defeat. Consider an alternate route. Just thank God that He is "working in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure," and then start the new year with hope in His abilities and not yours.

Self-Improvement

Some of the efforts we make include reading books and attending conferences. I don't put all books and conferences in the same box, but many of them amount mostly to new lists of laws on how to improve ourselves. If someone has been around the Christian community for very long, he has seen these philosophies come and go in waves.

Go to any Christian bookstore, and you will find so many self-help books that you have to wonder if Christians need to be told how to do nearly everything. When I considered writing Christian books, I asked myself, "Do I want to contribute to this madness?" There are Christian books that can help us, but when we are reading them, we need to "prove all things and hold fast to that which is good". Is the book pointing to Jesus as the solution, or is it pointing to what we do as the answer and simply giving a new set of laws to employ?

Remember the strength of sin is the law. If we make law the basis of change, we are setting ourselves up for failure. We've been recreated to live by grace through faith, not by law.

Advice

Another thing that can be helpful or harmful, depending on whether it is grace or law, is advice. "There is victory in an abundance of counselors" (Prov. 24:6 NASB), but if our teachers are feeding us with the law instead of the good news, or even worse, combining the two, we won't be permanently helped. It is good to seek out counsel, but let us carefully consider the source and content.

Another aspect of advice, which was already discussed, is that of unsolicited advice. You have likely struggled for years trying to overcome this battle. You've done much research. You've tried "everything". You have *lived* this. In fact, you've nearly made yourself an expert on the information available. Then someone, without knowing you or your circumstances at all, comes along with advice. This advice is usually premised on the belief that you are the cause of your situation; so, of course, you are the answer. It can be so wearying to hear unwanted advice from someone who has no idea of what you've been through.

One way to minimize being given unsolicited counsel is not to open the door to it in conversation. If your marriage is difficult, don't mention it to someone who will feel the need to "fix it". Don't talk about your financial woes if you aren't open to hearing about the latest and greatest seminar for success. Don't make reference to negative aspects about your physical frame unless you are ready to be told how to lose or gain weight or add muscle mass. Believe me, there will be those who offer advice, even if you don't open the door, but you can greatly lower your chances of this uncomfortable situation by not bringing it up.

Keeping our personal struggles private is not being unauthentic. Our personal problems are no one's business but ours and God's. If we choose to share them with someone, that is perfectly acceptable, but doing so is not proof that we are sincere. It can actually be the wise thing to keep private matters private.

Try Harder, Do More

After we have tried every method of improving ourselves or our situations, we will have to reckon with two more categories of law—trying harder and doing more. Yes, these are the answers to all problems we face, so we are told. Do it again! Do it better this time! Deep sigh!

Help Me Obey

The ultimate trap, after we've done more and tried harder, is to ask God to help us follow a formula or keep a law. Maybe we've all prayed this, "God, help me to do this!" I have some news for you—**God is not going to help us live by laws.** He sent His precious Son to set us free from law. He is not going to use law to perfect us.

Galatians 2:21 YLT

I do not make void the grace of God, for if righteousness [be] through law—then Christ died in vain.

Galatians 3:1-3

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? ²This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? ³Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?

I encourage you to ask the Lord to show you where law might be in operation in any overwhelming area of your life. Is there a list in the back of your mind that you got at church, from a book, at a seminar, one that you yourself constructed over time, or that is simply floating around in our popular culture so full of societal obligations? Ask Him to help you identify these laws.

God sent Jesus to set us free indeed from religious law. In Romans 7 we read that we have "died to the law" so that we could be joined to Christ. Shall we then return to our former spouse, the law, after we have died to him? Of course not. My experience has been that there are many layers of law lurking about us. It might

take some time for us to see them all. As we identify them and declare ourselves to be free from them, we will experience a new sense of freedom where we previously only felt locked up. Enjoy this process of liberation!

