



# WHY WE FAIL



## CHAPTER 1



# Our Righteousness Can't Do It.

Every Christian must face this truth: Our righteousness can't do it.

The body of Christ in the United States has had access to more teaching and preaching than any church in history. Technology has made an overabundance of Christian CD's, books, internet ministries and TV available to us. This is a great blessing.

But for many of us, our knowledge has outstripped our ability. If we are honest, most of us must admit that we're not applying everything we've learned. All too often, we're not living up to God's expectations. Many of us are striving too much. The truth is, our righteousness is still falling short of the mark.

This book on grace applies to every Christian, but many of you are in an especially good place to receive it. Perhaps you have gradually realized that the majority of your attempts at righteousness are falling short of the mark, and perhaps you are feeling quite confused and condemned about it. Perhaps you came to this realization many years ago, and your zeal for the Lord gradually cooled; now you are a more or less nominal Christian because you have lost hope that you can have a victorious Christian life. Perhaps you have given up completely. You may think God gave up on you.

But something good is about to happen to you even if you don't expect it. You have finally come to a place where the Lord can intervene powerfully in your life.

While the Lord has not *caused* you to fail, he has *allowed* you to fail in order to reveal that your righteousness can never satisfy his requirements for righteousness. He usually shows this truth through a process familiar to every generation of God's people. He allows you to struggle for years and years trying to be spiritual, trying to be holy, reading everybody's exhortations and formulas, zealously applying new keys to true spirituality, or learning new principles

about the deeper life or healing or prosperity. Then, after all those years of striving, you discover that many of the standard formulas don't seem to work and, worse yet, your righteousness still has blemishes all over it.

Or, on the other hand, perhaps you are the sort of person who usually *succeeds* at your own righteousness. Then the Lord reveals your spiritual inadequacy in another fashion—through your own self-righteousness, exposing a deep, nagging hunger for more holiness and power in your soul. You may recognize that, despite all your success, the true spirituality and abiding peace and lasting satisfaction you expected haven't been realized. Where are they? You thought Christians were supposed to have them!

You have them sometimes, maybe in worship or praise, but they are all too fleeting. You have tried to obey the biblical injunction to be holy as your heavenly Father is holy, and you have usually tried to respond zealously to preaching that exhorted you to aim at perfection. But you are becoming discouraged and exhausted!

Face it: Your righteousness and spiritual activity can't do it. God wants you to be totally convinced of this biblical and practical reality. Totally convinced. Why? Because the requirement of God is nothing less than *his righteousness* and *his holiness*. Always! The Lord expects and accepts nothing less than his own righteousness and holiness. The peace you seek cannot be found in your own righteousness. The only peace that can ever satisfy your soul is peace with God.

The standard in the gospel is always God's righteousness. But how do we obtain this? The Bible tells us:

*But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:21-24).*

God's standard is always God's righteousness, and that is where you must find your peace. Peace with God results not from trusting your own righteousness but from trusting only Christ. Have faith in him and the gift of his righteousness.

*Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).*

Perhaps you are a new Christian, or perhaps up until now you have not hit the brick wall I have described in this article. Thank God, because if you will learn grace *now*, you can avoid a lot of the pain and confusion the rest of us have suffered. Begin *now* to allow the Lord to show you how to live in his righteousness rather than your own.

Finally, perhaps you have been plagued by some kind of addiction, or maybe you have done some horribly unacceptable or sinful things. Read on! It is those who are most desperate who most need this book.

## CHAPTER 2

# Imprisoned for Mercy

We said in the first chapter that our righteousness can't do it. It can't satisfy God and it seldom satisfies us. Those who *are* satisfied with their own righteousness are actually in a world of trouble, but they don't know it.

Now I want to expand our understanding of why our righteousness can't do it. The Bible says that the entire world is under the penalty of sin, death:

*For the wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23).

We already know this; it's why most of us became Christians. Death is obvious, and we want eternal life.

But the Bible constantly declares that all humanity is imprisoned not only under the penalty for sin—death—but also under the power of sin—enslavement. We suffer both the *penalty* and the *power*. That is, we human beings are unable to extricate ourselves from sin. Sin has power over us.

The penalty and the power—both are undeniable realities. Humanity struggles to free itself from its prison of sin and from death as if some human cure is possible, but sin and death continue unabated.

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23).

*God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts* (Romans 1:24).

Both of these verses refer to all of humanity. God gave us over in our lusts. In other words, he gave us over to the power of sin. Thus we are unable to free ourselves from the power of sin. We are imprisoned by sin so that the apostle Paul cried:

*Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?*  
(Romans 7:24)

It is not so difficult to see why the Lord ordained that the penalty for sin should be death. Clearly sin cannot give life. Neither can the Lord allow the universe to become filled with eternal sinners. No, sin must have an end. Therefore, there must be death.

All of this makes sense. But why would a *good* God turn us over to the power of sin so that we are unable to free ourselves? Is it all a cruel hoax? No, it is the wisdom of God:

*For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all*  
(Romans 11:32).

Here is God's program. All of us are shut up (imprisoned) in disobedience (the power of sin) so that God can have mercy on us. Our imprisonment is effective because it leaves us with only one alternative: If we want to be forgiven and freed from the penalty and power of sin, we must accept God's mercy.

In other words, we have been imprisoned for the sake of mercy. That is what the Word of God says. God's will is mercy. It makes sense; it is God's will that we have been unable to free ourselves from sin so that we must put our hope totally in God's mercy. Note, *totally*. Not *partly* in God's mercy and *partly* in human ability. That is why Peter told us:

*Fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ* (1 Peter. 1:13).

The primary issue is placing our hope completely in the grace of God. Our only hope of righteousness is trusting Christ and his finished work at the cross—plus nothing! This sounds radical, and it is. But it is also biblical. The gospel of Jesus Christ is radical because nothing less can accomplish his purposes in us. Works righteousness is dead! The performance basis for right standing before God is dead!

I plan to demonstrate many times from the Scriptures and from experience that even *after* you become a Christian, the only way to maintain freedom from the power of sin is to continue to receive God's mercy. And don't kid yourself. If you persist in works righ-

teousness, the Lord will allow you to fail in order to guide you back to trusting totally in his mercy. Even as a Christian, sin will seem to prevail until you forsake works righteousness and begin trusting God's mercy as your only basis of right standing before him.

Someone will question this and say that the Bible teaches us that God has transferred us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of his dear Son (see Colossians 1:13), so how can sin still have power over us?

Of course, this transfer is complete, but it happened totally on the basis of grace. Many Christians forget this, and they return again to works righteousness. So I intend to demonstrate that sin will continue to have limited power over such Christians simply because works righteousness can never eliminate sin. This happened to me, and it may be happening to you. The Lord never causes us to sin, but he may allow some painful struggles and defeats in our lives until we acknowledge his grace more fully.

Most Christians say they know grace, but their struggles and defeats indicate quite the opposite.

Don't depend upon your human ability to grasp and apply grace. Rather, repent of that and right now ask the Lord to begin to reveal his grace to you—what it really means and how it really works.

O Lord, have mercy upon us and grant that we may see and know and accept your grace. Grant that we may learn to fix our hope totally in Jesus Christ and his shed blood.

## CHAPTER 3

# Imputed Righteousness

The first essential point we have made is that our righteousness can't satisfy God. Furthermore, because we are so imperfect, our own righteousness seldom satisfies *us* either. Christians who are somehow satisfied with works righteousness are in for trouble (see chapter 13).

God's requirement is nothing less than his righteousness and his holiness. Our righteousness cannot earn for us right standing before God. Such a standing before God must be imputed to us, as a gift, by God himself.

How many people have you talked to who will say, "Hey, I'm a good person. I haven't murdered anybody. I try to keep the rules. I try to help my neighbors," and so on and so forth?

But the issue in the gospel is *God's* righteousness. Who does *God* recognize as righteous? To whom does *God* impute right standing? What is *God's* criterion for right standing before him? The Bible clearly announces that there are people to whom God imputes righteousness. Who are they? Genesis 15:6 states:

*And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.*

Here's what Paul said about how this applies to you:

*What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as favor but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. (Romans 4:1-5)*

God made a promise to Abraham, Abraham believed it, and the

Lord reckoned Abraham's simple faith to him as righteousness. In other words, God imputed righteousness to Abraham on the basis of faith alone. This, then, is how God justifies the ungodly.

According to Paul, the gospel works exactly this way for us. The Lord has promised right standing (righteousness) before him to anyone who will put his faith in the finished work of Christ for forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Therefore, like Abraham, when we simply believe this promise of God, the Lord reckons righteousness to us.

Anyone qualifies for this grace—every day! You can simply believe God and receive the gift of righteousness. And the best part is that this imputed righteousness is God's righteousness, nothing less.

This salvation is the only salvation. And it is God's best, not some lukewarm compromise. It will in fact establish you to reign in life:

*Much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:17)*

It's that simple: The grace of God is primarily the gift of God's righteousness through the blood of Jesus Christ. And as a believer, you have it. Right now!

## CHAPTER 4

# How I Lost My Devotional Life -or- If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It

I turned my life over to Christ while I was stationed on an army base. I was alone in making this decision. As far as I knew, there were no other Christians in my barracks. I had been taught the gospel years before in Sunday school, thank the Lord, and that's the only reason I understood how to receive him.

Immediately after I received him, I wanted to buy a Bible and study it. I wanted time with God. I wanted to pray. I didn't know most Christians called this practice "devotions".

I was so full of joy! I had been a chief among sinners, always in trouble, who had been reconciled to God and saved as a gift because Jesus died for me. My response was a strong desire to know God. And I wanted to learn to share him with others. I had a genuine hunger for the Lord.

I found a chaplain on the army base who gave me the key to his office, and every evening I eagerly spent literally hours with God. The words in my Bible lived; the prayers I prayed were answered; God showed me so much then. This continued for months.

After I was discharged from the army, I began to associate more and more with Christians. They were very sincere, and they immediately began to teach me that I *had* to have a devotional life. Not just, hey, the Lord really wants time with you, and you need this for your spiritual growth (which would be the correct approach), but, you *have* to do this if you want God's blessing and direction on your life day by day. And in addition: Devotional time early in the morning is best. Thus, my evening devotions, though powerful, were inferior to morning devotions. Christians who rose early in the morning were considered more spiritual. (I had best hasten to add that the Christians who said these things to me may not have

meant their statements as strongly as I took them. I may well have jumped to the wrong conclusions totally on my own.)

Unknown to me, I moved from practicing devotions as a *response* to grace to devotions as a *law for righteousness*. I already had God's blessing and direction on my life as gifts, but now, it seemed, I had to try to earn these gifts. I already had a healthy relationship with God as a gift, but now I had to try to earn it.

What do you suppose happened to my devotional life after that? Right! It died. It became drudgery after that, and much less edifying.

All legalism bears similar fruit: *death*. As soon as I shifted from the grace basis of relating to God (being a simple sinner saved by grace) to the works basis (developing my own righteousness), sin revived and my spiritual life died. Bang! As though I were shot! Whenever I succeeded at keeping my devotions religiously, I felt righteous (self-righteous), and whenever I failed I felt that God had withdrawn his presence from me.

*For the letter [law] kills, but the Spirit gives life* (2 Corinthians 3:6).

I encourage you, by the mercies of God, to put all of your confidence in the Lord. He can bless you and direct you even if your devotional life presently stinks! He can create devotion in you through grace. Devotions, by definition, should spring from devotion rather than from self-justification.

And may he help us all to learn that since the power of grace ain't broke, we don't need to fix it with legalism.

As time goes on, we shall observe how faithfulness and self-control—both of which are fruit of the Spirit, according to Galatians 5:22-23—play a role in building a stable devotional life. Suffice it for now to say that the fruit of the Spirit is utterly opposed to legalism. Legalism is any systematic attempt to earn right standing before God. Whereas, in contrast, true obedience to the Lord is never an attempt to earn right standing before him. Instead, it is a response of simple faith to *the gift* of righteousness we have received from him in Christ.

## CHAPTER 5

# Legalism Arouses Sinful Passions

Does the honeymoon have to end? Mine did. I had months and months of powerful times with God, but it all ended.

However, remember that *God* didn't end the honeymoon. I did—with legalism. I suspect this happens to most Christians. We begin our lives with Christ totally by grace, the gift of righ-

teousness. But then we can't rest there and grow there. Grace is too radical: It is diametrically opposed to the world system in which we are immersed. Our world system defines human worth mainly in terms of production, beauty, power, and wealth. Thus, we feel insecure with grace, and we grasp again at a legalistic performance basis for acceptance. Legalism is any attempt on our part to establish legal righteousness for ourselves before God. Legalism is essentially self-righteousness. It is our attempt to be good enough to control God.

But God uses our thickness of skull! The pain and the pride of our legalism ultimately drive us back to justification by faith. Beginning with Romans 3:20, here are the basics of this process:

*Because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.*

Ultimately, instead of perfecting us, our legalism exposes our sinfulness simply because we always fail to keep the law perfectly. Here is a fact worth remembering: *Any* spiritual principle, no matter how biblical, that is used legalistically (i.e., which is made into a law for righteousness) will do one thing for sure: It will show us that we are sinners *because we are sinners!* So we get forced back to justification by faith. Romans 3:20 is pure and simple truth: Through the law comes, not righteousness, but the knowledge of sin.

If you are a sinner (I could as easily say, if you are a human being), legalism will actually make you worse:

*For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death (Rom. 7:5).*

You see, God's laws relating to morality (primarily the Ten Commandments) can actually *arouse* our sinful passions. This is not because God's law is evil but because we are sinners and God's law diagnoses the problem for us.

To illustrate how well this works, I will fabricate an imaginary, tongue-in-cheek law for you. Here is your law; keep it diligently: Do *not* think of a red flag. Do *not* think of a red flag. Do *not* think of a red flag. See? If you *know* what red is, and if you *know* what a flag is, this law actually arouses you to think of the forbidden red flag.

Well, pretty much the same thing happens when sinners are forbidden to sin. This is part of the purpose of the law of God: Through the law comes the knowledge of sin. The law defines sin and brings sin into dramatic relief. Thus, any legalism, especially when it is based on biblical principles, will aggravate rather than alleviate your sinful desires.

Externally, law can control sinful passions, even as a prison can contain criminals. Thus, law can externally control society. But control or incarceration is not transformation. It is external, not internal. It is prison, not freedom. And God himself tells us this. He *never* implies that the law by itself transforms anyone.

Well, if God's law used legalistically arouses sinful passions, and if the law merely incarcerates, does it have any value beyond revealing or exposing sin? Absolutely! And we *will* get to that – read on!

## CHAPTER 6

# Satisfied with Jesus

Isaiah 53 begins this way: “Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” Then Isaiah went on to describe the crucifixion of Jesus Christ hundreds of years before it happened, even to the details of Jesus’ burial (with a rich man in his death).

Verses 5 and 6 in Isaiah 53 are specific as to what Jesus accomplished for us:

*But He was pierced through for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,  
And by His scourging we are healed.  
All of us like sheep have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own way;  
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all  
To fall on Him.*

Then, in verse 11, Isaiah went on to make an exceedingly relevant but often overlooked statement:

*As a result of the anguish of His [Jesus’] soul, He [God the Father] will see it and be satisfied.*

This Scripture asserts unequivocally that God the Father is *satisfied* with Jesus’ work at Calvary. The question is, are we? Are you? Will you believe it? Specifically, regarding your right standing before God? Will you be satisfied with Jesus? The rest of this verse says:

*By His knowledge the Righteous One  
My Servant, will justify the many,  
As He will bear their iniquities.*

According to God, what Jesus did at Calvary is enough. It is total and complete. You can't add a thing to it. And not a demon in hell can take anything away from it. *God* is satisfied. So Jesus declared from the cross, "It is finished." If it is finished, it is finished! One major problem in the body of Christ today is that Christians have not learned to be totally and completely satisfied with Jesus in the same way that our Father is completely satisfied with Jesus.

I'm reminded of a person who was part of one of our recovery groups who was constantly plagued with doubts concerning *Grace plus Nothing*, for months and months. One day the Lord delivered her from all of her confusion and doubt by speaking one simple question to her heart and mind: "What is it about, 'It is finished,' that you don't understand?"

You can be satisfied with Jesus plus nothing: his righteousness, his sin offering, all that he is *for* you. His righteousness is the basis for your relationship with Him.