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Legalism (Part 2)



Toward a Radically Christian Counterculture - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses the topic of legalism and urges Christians to break away from the dominant culture and be obedient to Jesus Christ. He clarifies that legalism is not strict obedience to God but rather imposing human standards on others and rejecting the Word of God in favor of traditions. Gregg emphasizes the importance of valuing and pursuing things that God values rather than those valued by the world, and urges Christians to exercise wisdom, not legalism, in their choices and actions.

Transcript

Tonight I want to talk about a subject I'm calling legalism or wisdom. And this is really part of what you've heard me say probably before, the idea that I believe something is desperately needed in the modern church, and that is what I have referred to in times past. As a radically Christian counterculture.

A radically Christian counterculture. Radically Christian simply means going back to the root of Christianity. Going back to Jesus, in other words.

And counterculture means a consensus of a group of people who practice certain things by agreement, by shared value and consensus. There's a culture expression, and because when I say counterculture, I'm talking about something that's counter to the dominant culture. I don't think there are many Christians left who have failed to see that the dominant culture is really far more unfriendly toward Christianity than it was 30 years ago, if you're that old.

Old enough to remember 30 years ago or 40 years ago. And a lot of people consider that a great disaster. There's a lot of Christians who want to reform the dominant culture, make it a little more like it was back in the 50s, back when things were kind of decent, when Christians were respected even by non-Christians.

A lot of people went to church whether they loved God or not. They didn't have as much sex and violence on TV and not even very much in the movies. And it was just a lot more sanitized culture than that which we see in the dominant culture today.

A lot of Christians want to try to get us back there again, and they think it's a great disaster that we've gotten this far away from it. I suppose it probably is a disaster because of the number of lives that are ruined by this development. But I think in terms of the church, it should have no real disastrous impact on the Christian church if the church would simply follow Jesus Christ.

Because the dominant culture in America 50 years ago or 40 years ago really wasn't a Christian culture then either. It was just a culture more friendly toward Christianity, less hostile toward Christianity. It wasn't really Christian.

It was the culture of the generation that spawned my generation. My generation was a disaster. It's my generation that is now in the White House.

Now I think you'll agree, my generation's a disaster. My own life was not destroyed as badly as some because I was raised in a Christian home and I was converted young. But I have to say that most people my age that I knew really ruined their lives.

A lot of them got back on track. Some of them got right with God eventually. But there's a lot of corruption, a lot of stuff to live down.

There's a lot of evil that has come into the culture because of my generation. But my generation, although we were the culprits, we have to realize my generation was trained by the previous generation. The Leave it to Beaver generation.

The Ozzie and Harriet generation. The Clean generation. They sent their kids to public school.

They surrendered the raising of their kids to the pagan culture. Because the pagan culture seemed harmless in those days. One thing I think we have going for us now as Christians is that we can now not succumb to the delusion that the pagan culture is harmless to our children and to us Christians.

We now know the dominant culture is our enemy. It was then. It's just Christians didn't know that then.

No one is going to mistake the dominant culture today, that culture of MTV, that culture of Hollywood, that culture of the modern political leaders of the liberal sort. No one is going to mistake that culture for being friendly to Christianity. It is not friendly to Christianity.

But as I said, it's kind of nice to know who our enemies are. And I say our enemies in the sense of those who are opposed to our efforts to serve God and to raise our children for God. Now, I have proposed that we don't need to see the church reform the dominant culture to go back to the way it was 40, 50 years ago.

What the church has always been supposed to do and used to do in the days of the book of Acts was have its own culture in whatever dominant culture it may domicile itself. The church has its own culture if it is obedient to Jesus Christ. And what the church needs is not to clean up the dominant culture, but to present to the world a viable alternative society, which is what Jesus came to establish.

He called it the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of God is made up of people who are subject to the King, Jesus, and who do what he says. And when they do, they look real different, even from the more decent secular culture.

Now, most Christians I know, and I'm talking about basically good Christians. Most of the Christians I hang out with are pretty serious-minded Christians. But most Christians I know, and I'd have to include myself in this, do not find everything that this involves comfortable.

It's much easier to go with the grain of society. And if we have to resist it, it's not so much we want to swim upstream, the opposite direction. We just like to kind of put on the brakes a little bit, throw out an anchor, and not have the modern society cause us to drift so rapidly in the direction it's going.

The church has been that way. It's kind of thrown out an anchor. And it's been dragging this anchor downstream as the culture, the secular culture, has been dragging the church along just more slowly than the rest of the stream.

So, the church is really just, you know, what, 7 to 10 years behind the secular culture, but going the same direction. Now, what we need is not Christians who say, we object to the rate of decay of our culture, and therefore, we're going to go more slowly that direction. We need a church that says, we are not going that direction at all.

And we're not going to apologize for our difference. We're not going to be ashamed of our difference. We're going to stand by what Jesus Christ said.

If we have to die for that, we'll gladly do so. That's the heritage of Christians, has always been to die for being obedient to Jesus Christ. If they had to, and most lands, most times in history, that's what Christians really had to count as part of the cost of following Jesus.

And if we're going to risk life and limb for Jesus Christ, we might as well be genuine about it. What a shame it would be if our culture began to outwardly and physically persecute Christians, and some of us died as martyrs, but we had never really brought ourselves into total conformity to Jesus Christ. So, we died half obedient.

If we're going to die, why don't we die all the way obedient? Why don't we be as Christ-like as the church in the early days of the book of Acts was? And, you know, it's a funny thing. The world, when it looks on a consistent and uncompromised church, isn't quite sure what to make of it. We read in the book of Acts, initially, when the early church was

just forming in Jerusalem, it says they had favor with all the people.

Now, there were some, of course, those in power in the Sanhedrin who wanted to persecute them, but the worldly society looking on, they said, okay, these people scare us, but you know what? I have to respect them, because they practice what they preach. Now, I don't think in our modern American culture anyone is really scared of Christians, except maybe as a voting bloc. They might be afraid of us as a political special interest category, but they're not really afraid of us really doing any, intruding into their lives in any way that Jesus really wants to intrude in their lives.

And the reason is because they don't see Jesus really intruding into our lives that much. We're still staying as comfortable as we can in the dominant culture. We're still in the water.

We're still being dragged downstream, a little slower than the rest of the tide, but we haven't turned the boat around and started rowing upstream. You know why? You want to know why? Because that's hard. It's hard to walk into a stiff wind.

It's easier to turn your back to it and let it kind of propel you along, although you don't want it to get you off your feet. You know, you kind of have to hold it back a little bit as you walk, you know, with a stiff wind in your back, but you don't want to turn and walk into it, if you're lazy spiritually. And you know what the Bible says about people who are lazy? In Proverbs it says, The diligent shall bear rule, but the slothful shall be under tribute.

That means they'll come under the control and under bondage of someone else. If you are spiritually lazy, to the degree that you are spiritually slothful, you will simply be under tribute. That is, you'll be under the control and under bondage to the dominant culture.

But if you are spiritually courageous, vigorous, diligent, and say, you know, the church is already hated in this culture and we compromise with them all the time. If I'm going to be hated anyway, I might as well be hated for doing the right thing. I might as well be hated for being all out for Jesus Christ.

And when we decide to do that, and we begin to read the Scriptures and try to apply that to everything in our life, we'll find out that a lot has to change. The church has not been a consistent witness for biblical standards. What the church has done largely in modern times, the evangelical church, the convicted church, basically has taken some kind of a stand in measure against abortion, some kind of stand in measure against the homosexual agenda, some kind of stand in general against pornography and, you know, distribution of condoms at public schools and things like that.

But this is just really a really minimal stopgap effort to try to hold back the crushing tide

of a culture that's raging against God. And we have not really gone back to the Bible to say, well, what does the Bible really say we should be doing different besides just saying, we don't believe in abortion and we don't believe that homosexuality is normal. What else should we be doing? Everything different.

We should be obeying Jesus Christ in everything. And when we do, we find that that changes, if we're willing to do it, it changes everything about our economic life. It's hard for me to predict which area of Christianity is going to offend Christians the most.

But I suspect that the things Jesus said about money, if they were applied, if they were pressed upon the consciences of the modern church, I suspect that would be the area that modern Christians would be most offended by Jesus Christ. I think we'd crucify Him. I wouldn't.

I don't think. And I'm not saying all of you would. But I believe that if Jesus came here today and preached the same things, someone in the evangelical church would take Him out and hang Him.

Because they love their money. And Jesus said some things about that. Now, if we would change everything about our lives to conform to what Jesus said, it would radically change our whole economic and financial concepts and behavior.

It would change a lot of what we think about war, a lot of what we think about how we are to engage the dominant culture. See, Christians today figure the way we engage the dominant culture is we either just go along with it and have seeker-sensitive meetings, where we just let the dominant culture dictate what we're going to be doing on Sunday morning. And we just imitate it as best we can so that they feel comfortable with us.

Or we say, no, we're going to take our arms against the dominant culture. We're going to run for Senate. We're going to run for office.

We're going to try to get our guys into the media. We're going to try to get our guys into the arts. We're going to try to get our guys into the public schools.

And we're going to try to force this culture back the other way. And neither of those things are what Jesus did. Jesus did not accommodate the dominant culture, and He did not try to change the dominant culture.

He called people out of it. Jesus said to His disciples, If you are of the world, the world will love His own, but because I have called you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Now, if He's called us out of the world, what has He called us into? He's called us into His kingdom and glory, the Bible says in 1 Thessalonians.

And we need to learn the ways of the kingdom of God, the ways of Jesus Christ. And we'll find they are diametrically opposed in many areas to the ways of even the civilized,

religious, evangelical church culture that many of us have come to be acclimated to. And much of what Jesus said would get Him in big trouble with us if He said it here today.

And I'd probably get in trouble because I'm trying to say as much as possible the same things. Now, I don't want to tell you that I alone am faithful to what Jesus said. I'm sure I'm not as faithful to it as I should be.

I'm not here presenting myself as the paragon of, you know, here's the example of someone who follows Jesus to the letter, everything He said just the right way. I do not. But I will say this, I'm not willing to be satisfied with anything less than that in my life.

I'm not there yet. Like Paul said, I am not yet perfect, but this one thing I do, forgetting the things that are behind, looking to the things of before, I press on toward the mark of what? Of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. What is that? Well, why don't we let Jesus describe it to us? Why don't we read what He taught and tell us what He wants us to be like? What is that high calling supposed to look like? That's what I'm concerned about.

Like Paul, I know I'm not perfect. In fact, I'm not even worthy to compare myself with Paul. I'm not in his league at all.

But this much I have in common that I'm not perfect. I think we can all say we're like Paul in that respect. But also like Paul, I really am not satisfied either.

I'm not satisfied with the degree of imperfection. I want to be wholly obedient, and that's what I want to present when I teach. I want to call Christians to radically change the way they do family, the way they do money, the way they do church, the way they do involvement in the dominant culture, the way they do marriage, the way they do all kinds of things.

Because the Bible speaks directly about these things, and our culture has rejected them. Even the evangelical church. I know you think, well, I've seen all kinds of great books in the Christian bookstore about how to build your child's self-esteem and how to have a marriage where your passion never goes out and so forth.

Yeah, you'll find those books in the Christian bookstores, but that's not what the Bible says. The Bible doesn't say that your passion has to never cool in your marriage. The Bible never says you have to build your child's self-esteem.

That's the problem. That's the church accommodating what the world values. When will we begin to go back to Scripture and say, well, what does God value? What does God say about marriage and children and money and education and birth control and all these other things? Well, if we found the answer, would we want to know it? Would we want to do it? I hope the answer is yes, of course, about everyone here.

I know that's what I desire. Now, having mentioned any of these issues, let's talk about education. Suppose I said that while the Bible doesn't directly command parents to homeschool their children, suppose I said I still think it's one of the most advisable things for Christians to be to homeschool their children.

Suppose I said even though the Bible doesn't say directly not to use birth control, I think that in keeping with biblical principle, I think it's more advisable not to do so. Suppose I began to say some of these things that go against the grain of most of us. What would be the first thing that the average evangelical would likely label me? Legalists, exactly, a legalist.

You begin to present a standard of compliance to the Bible at a higher degree than that which most Christians are comfortable with, and you can bet the first word you're going to hear coming out of someone's mouth is legalism. Now, there is such a thing as legalism, and I'm not immune. I could succumb to it, but I think it's important for us to recognize that presenting these alternatives, and even saying emphatically, you know, you need to look at this, you need to consider your ways, and see whether your ways are complying with what the Word of God teaches, that is not in itself legalism.

Now, I have known people who are legalistic about birth control, about women wearing head coverings, about homeschooling, about almost anything you want to name. Christians can be legalistic. I can be legalistic.

But what I want to do is talk about this topic, legalism or wisdom. If we advocate that Christians change their whole lives to be more in conformity with Jesus Christ, so that collectively the Christians are seen by the world as people who do things differently, unashamedly, unapologetically. Christians just are not trying to run with the world anymore.

Remember what Peter said in 1 Peter chapter 4, how he said, they think it's strange, your old friends, your unsaved friends, they think it's strange that you do not run with them to the same excessive riot, and they speak evil of you. Why? They don't feel comfortable. In a sense, by living differently, you're rejecting their lifestyle.

You're not following it. Everyone else they know is, but you're not. And that makes them feel uncomfortable, because they in their conscience know their lifestyle is not right with God.

As long as everyone they know is doing the same thing they are, they don't have to think about what their conscience tells them. They've got the affirmation of everyone around them. Then they see someone who's doing what they know in their conscience is right, and that condemns them.

The Bible says that Noah, in his generation, condemned the world by obeying God. It

says that in Hebrews chapter 11. He condemned the world of the ungodly by being obedient.

Now, he didn't go out and preach condemnation. He just, by being obedient, he condemned everyone who was disobedient by his own life. And that is maybe why we're not seeing too many conversions today.

Now, maybe you go to a church where people get converted. I have not seen very many conversions in any church that I've been visiting or anything for a very long time. Not like there were in the 70s during the revival.

In the 70s, I mean, people got saved by the droves everywhere. Not just in one church, but, I mean, God was just harvesting. I think one reason why maybe we're not seeing more conversions is that the people who are in the world don't see any reason why they should become Christians.

Why bother? It's no different than the way they're living. The Christians do most of the same things the worldly people do. In fact, if we include under the rubric Christians, those who attend evangelical churches, we can say they do everything the world does.

There are practicing homosexuals. There are people getting abortions. There's immorality.

There's divorce. There's adultery going on in the evangelical churches. Why should the world that looks on at this scene say, I think I want to be like them? They're already like them.

They're already like us. The only difference is our churches do it, but feel guilty about it. Because we say we're not supposed to do it.

The world doesn't. They don't feel any guilt about it. So why should they want to bring guilt on them by becoming Christians? What people should see is what people used to see in the days of the apostles.

They looked at the church and said, these people are not affirming our values. These people are walking a different direction. We are into materialism.

These people are rejecting materialism. We are into satisfying our lusts and our passions. These people are into living pure and holy lives before God.

We are into our rivalries and standing up for our rights. These people are laying down their rights and laying down their lives for each other. These people are rejecting everything we hold dear as pagans.

And that's what the world should see when they see us. They may not like what they see, and they might not even be attracted to it, but they will know, probably for the first

time if the church ever starts doing this, they will know there's an alternative. If you ever read through the book of Ezekiel, there's a refrain.

Ezekiel is very repetitious, and there's quite a few refrains that occur a lot of times in the book of Ezekiel. One of them is this. God says to Ezekiel, you go tell them what I said.

And whether they will hear you or whether they will not hear you, they will know that there's been a prophet among them. And I would have to say the world that we live in does not know that there's a prophet among them. Because that organization called the evangelical church that calls itself the prophetic voice doesn't act very prophetic.

It doesn't really present God's alternative. It just presents a watered down, semi-sanitized version of the world's way of doing things. Just cut off the excesses, but value the same things.

But just bite the bullet and don't go all the way with some of the things that the world does. That's what the policy of the modern church has been. Jesus calls us in another direction.

Now, if we would begin to do, or if I or anyone else began to advocate doing all the things that Jesus said, more than just in a generic sense like I just said, we need to do all that Jesus said. No one's going to disagree with that, who's a Christian. If I said, you know folks, we really ought to obey Jesus more.

Everyone here would go, amen, amen, we all need to do that. But if I begin saying, well, we need to obey Jesus when he said to turn the other cheek. We need to obey Jesus when he said to give that everyone that asked.

We need to obey Jesus when he said that if a person wants to take you to court, give them what they want without fighting them in court. We need to do what Jesus said when he said that if you divorce your spouse and marry another, you're committing adultery. We need to really do what Jesus said.

You start getting specific about it, and people say, now wait a minute here. That's not the kind of preaching I like. Preacher's gone to meddling.

You bet, Jesus is a meddler. He meddles with everything. Very intrusive.

That's the only way he can be the Lord. Now, was Jesus a legalist? No, actually the people he was most critical of and the people who killed him were the legalists. But Jesus presented a very high and holy standard of obedience.

So, we need to say, well, if we're going to recognize legalism, which I hope we all want to avoid, we might say, well, what is legalism? And what's the difference between that and just, you know, being holy and doing the right thing and being obedient? Well, I'd like to

talk to you a little bit about that, and then I want to talk about what wisdom is. And I want you to see there's a difference between legalism and wisdom. Although a person who's legalistic might live his life a certain way because of his legalism, a person who is wise might do many of the same things without being legalistic at all.

But because he is wise. And I want you to know the difference between those two things. First of all, let me tell you what legalism is not.

Because I hear the word legalism used a great deal, applied to situations that I just don't believe there's any reason to apply that label. What legalism is not, the first thing that legalism is not, is it's not in the Bible. That is, the word legalism isn't found in the Bible.

But the concept of legalism is. The Pharisees were what we would normally call legalists. The Judaizers, against whom Paul wrote the book of Galatians, they were rightly called legalists.

But the word legalism is not in the Bible. And that makes it exceedingly difficult to know how to use it. I mean, if we want to be biblically thinking, we want to say, well, I don't agree with that.

That's legalism. The problem is we can't go to any verse of the Bible that says, well, legalism is, because there isn't any mention of legalism by that name in the Bible. However, if we say, well, when I say legalism, I mean that error of the Pharisees that they were into, that Jesus continually criticized.

Or I mean that error of the Judaizers that Paul wrote Galatians and Romans and Colossians against. Then I can begin to put some, you know, some definition to the word that has some biblical basis. But one thing that legalism certainly is not, legalism is not the same thing as strict obedience to God.

Jesus advocated strict obedience to God, to himself. Jesus said in Luke 6, 46, why do you call me Lord, Lord, and you don't do the things that I say? In 1 John 2, you might want to look there. 1 John 2, verses 4 and 5, John said, He that saith, I know him, and virtually all Christians make that claim, I know Jesus.

Do you know Jesus? Do you know God? Well, anyone who says, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments is a liar. Now, John doesn't mince words here. He doesn't put it delicately.

He says, well, let me just call it by its right name, you're a liar. You say you know him, but you don't obey him. You're a liar.

Because people who know him do obey him, if they really know him. He says, and the truth is not in that person, but whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected. Hereby know we that we are in him.

Our hope is that we will be found in him, not having a righteousness of our own, but the righteousness of God given to us in Christ through faith. Am I in him? That's the only hope I have, is that I might be found in him. Well, it says, here's how we know that we are in him.

If we keep his word. Obedience is not a legalistic thing. Obedience is what God has expected from his people since he made people.

And so, for someone to say, we need to obey God, is not legalism. Now, how specifically, how detailed does this obedience have to be? Well, you remember 2 Corinthians chapter 10, verses 4 and 5. Paul said that the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but are mighty through God. To what? The pulling down of strongholds, casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Jesus Christ.

Every thought brought into captivity to the obedience of Jesus Christ. That's a pretty high standard. Every thought has to be obedient.

And if every thought, then certainly every action. How can I do disobedient actions when my thoughts are captive to the obedience of Christ? Paul was no legalist, but Paul is the one who gave us those instructions. John was no legalist, but John is the one who said, if we don't keep his word, then we say, no, we're lying, we don't.

It is therefore not legalism to say, we must obey God. It is also not legalism necessarily, it can be, but it doesn't have to be, to advocate a high standard of holiness. Now, what's the difference between that and obedience? Not much, it's just a different aspect of obedience.

We're commanded by God to be holy. But certainly to be holy means that we are separated unto God. That's what the word holy means, is set apart.

Set apart for God. Set apart from what? Set apart from the world and its ways. Set apart from all that isn't agreeable with God.

In other words, holiness implies a great deal of, well, a high degree of purity of life. A high degree of valuing and pursuing the things that God values, rather than the things the world values. That's what holiness is.

That's not legalism, to say, we need to be holy. In fact, the Bible tells us again and again to be holy. And Peter, in 1 Peter chapter 1, makes it exceedingly strict, it seems.

Yet, he could not really be called a legalist and fault be found with him for this. But in 1 Peter chapter 1, in verse 15 and 16, he said, But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation. That King James word conversation means manner of living.

In all manner of living. Because it is written, be holy, for I am holy. Now God said, be holy because I'm holy.

And Peter said, well, as he is holy, you need to be holy. How much? In all areas of your life. Every area of your life needs to be conformed to that which God says he wants his people separated unto.

And that is not legalism. To advocate a high standard of holiness and moral conduct is not legalism. It is also not legalism to give wise counsel about things when people are doing things that are foolish, in the sense that it will lead them probably to sin and compromise.

Now, you know, this is where we get into things like, let's just say, you know, you shouldn't go into 7-Eleven if you have an eye that wanders to the magazine covers there. Now, there's no place in the Bible that says you can't go to 7-Eleven. And if someone said, no Christian should ever go to 7-Eleven, that's forbidden.

Anyone who goes there is going to be excommunicated from this church. That would be legalism. It goes beyond what the Bible says.

But if you're saying, well, I'm just struggling with lust everywhere I go. You know, I'm just having this real problem with lust. And I find out that you're going places where you're just confronted all the time with these images.

For me to say, well, you know, I think you ought to not go to those places anymore. I'm saying something maybe that goes beyond the exact commands of Scripture. But if I'm presenting it as wise counsel, that is basically counsel that if you follow it, it will help you to conform more to what the Bible says to do, that's not legalism unless I condemn you for rejecting my counsel.

You see, when counsel is offered, it's different than commands. A counsel is where I say, this is what I believe wisdom would dictate. Now, it's up to you to be wise or not.

It's between you and God whether you do that. Now, as long as wise counsel is given, even if it goes, it may go beyond the exact letter of what the Scripture says. If it's not imposed as a standard for which you'll be condemned if you reject it, that is not legalism.

And of course, it's not legalism to exercise divinely appointed authority. Like when parents exercise authority over their children, they can be very strict at times, but they have a commission from God to do so. That's not legalism either.

Putting children under the law of their parents or for that matter, putting adults under the law of the land is not legalism. If there is divinely appointed authority to submit to it or to be made to submit to it is not legalism. So, let's not call things legalism that aren't.

But what is legalism? Well, in the Bible, if we use the Pharisees as an example, and I won't turn you to all the passages because there are so many, but legalism seems to be found where there is the imposition of man's rules upon God's people in such a way that man's rules are presented as if they were God's rules. Now, the Pharisees had this as a sort of a principle problem in their theology. They believed in the Old Testament law, but they also believed in what they called the traditions of the elders, which were the orally transmitted opinions of the rabbis for several hundred years.

They were not written down in Jesus' day. They were written down hundreds of years later in what's called the Talmud today. But in those days, it was simply orally passed along traditions of the rabbis' opinions about what they could do and what they couldn't do.

Now, there's nothing wrong with hearing a rabbi's opinions or a Bible teacher's suggestions. But what was wrong with the Pharisees is they had lost track of the difference between what God said and what the rabbis said. As far as they were concerned, it was all the same.

They believed that if rabbi so-and-so said it, then you'd better do it just as if God had said it. And so, you've got man's opinions coming in there. And Jesus said to the Pharisees, you full well reject the Word of God that you might keep your traditions.

And in vain you worship God, teaching for doctrine the traditions of men. Now, when you begin to teach human traditions as if they were God's Word, and particularly when this begins to impose upon people behavior that the Bible doesn't really support imposing, that is legalism. That's going beyond the Word of God.

Eve was, as far as we know, the first legalist. I don't think there were many before her. But she was the first one to add to the Word of God and act as if her words were as good as God's.

Because God had said, you shall not eat of that tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But she said, well, we're not supposed to eat it or touch it. Now, legalism usually has great suggestions.

And if you're not supposed to eat something, it's a good idea to keep your hands off it too. But touching it isn't the same thing as eating it. The Bible says that women should be modestly appareled, and no doubt men should be as well.

But the Bible doesn't say how long the hem length has to be. The Bible doesn't say that women have to wear dresses merely. The Bible doesn't say that.

When people begin to impose that on it and judge people by specific humanly devised standards, it goes beyond the Word of God. Now, let me say this. It may be a great suggestion.

You know, if someone says, well, I think women should be modest. I really think it's best if women wear dresses and not short dresses particularly. If they want to say that, that's fine.

It can be a great suggestion. And people can follow it if they want to or not if they don't want to. The Bible doesn't say specifically about that issue.

It does say they have to be modest. But you go beyond the Word of God when you begin to insist upon specifics that are man-made. The Bible says it's wrong and sinful to be drunk with wine.

But it's like Eve. You know, we're not supposed to eat it or touch it. I grew up in a church that taught you can't touch alcoholic drinks.

You can't take a sip of alcoholic drink. It's a sin. The Bible doesn't say that.

Now, is it good advice not to drink alcohol at all? Great advice. And I don't drink it at all. I avoid it altogether.

You know why? Mainly because it stumbles other people. I've never really had a problem with drinking. But some people do.

And for that reason, it's a great idea to avoid it altogether. But that's all it is. It's a great idea.

It's not a command of God. God nowhere says thou shalt not touch wine. As a matter of fact, there's a great number of godly people who did drink wine in the Bible.

There's not a criticism of them. But getting drunk, that's against the law of God. But when someone says, well, if it's wrong to get drunk, then we ought to also make sure we never get anywhere near alcohol.

Well, it might be a great suggestion. I wouldn't mind advising my children to follow that practice. Don't touch it.

Don't drink it. If you don't drink it once, you'll never become a problem drinker. But I can't give the impression justly that the Bible says don't ever touch it because it simply doesn't.

When we add to the word of God good advice from human beings and then act as if the good advice is the same thing as the word of God, we have reduced God's authority to the level of people. And that's an insult to God, and He's not pleased with it. And that's what the Pharisees did, and that is the source of legalism.

Now, when you begin to raise man's ideas to the level of God's or more probably reduce God's to the level of man's in terms of authority and influence, one of the results is you

can manipulate things. As soon as a man's good advice or a man's explanation or whatever is as good as God's word, then you can interpret things and connive so that you can excuse certain behaviors of your own while condemning others for doing the same thing. You can have the loopholes.

The Pharisees had all these loopholes. They didn't live holier than anyone else, but they condemned other people for doing the very things they did. Jesus said that.

Jesus said they put great burdens grievously to be borne on men's shoulders, but they don't lift a finger to carry such a burden themselves. He said, whatever they say to do when they speak from Moses' seat in the city, do what they say, but don't do what they do because they say and they do not do. Legalism is generally hypocritical.

You impose a human standard of conduct on people, and then because it isn't from God, you find ways to violate it secretly or in your own way yourself, but you still use it to condemn other people. That's legalism. It is not legalism to actually preach the word of God and say you should be doing that and to rebuke people who don't do it.

And even for the church to discipline people who don't keep the word of God. The churches should be disciplining people for sin in their churches. I read just the other day of a woman whose husband ran off with another woman.

Of course, it broke their family up. But then he and the other woman started coming to the same church, and the woman, the original wife, is sitting in a pew in the same church with the guy and his whore. He's married to his whore now, but she's still his whore.

Jesus said if he divorces his wife without grounds of fornication and marries another, he's committing adultery. Now, the Bible says no adulterer shall enter into the kingdom of God. The Bible says if someone claims to be a brother and is an adulterer, don't even eat with him.

Now, churches ought to be prepared to discipline their congregational members for actual obedience, or I should say for their actual disobedience to what Jesus Christ said. But sadly, what I find happening, and this is what legalism does, people begin to pick and choose what they're going to enforce. They've lost track of what God said and what man said.

It's all the same to them. So, they enforce selectively. So, you've got churches that allow people to divorce and remarry without any grounds at all and stay in the church on good terms.

But all the while, they'll excommunicate someone if they see them drinking a beer. Full well, they reject the Word of God to keep their traditions, Jesus said. Very commonly done.

That's just part of legalism. That's what the Pharisees did. And yet, all the while, legalism is condemning of others and justifying of self.

And usually very self-righteous. Now, one of the features of legalism that is always obvious is that the person who is legalistic, he keeps a standard of sorts, but he doesn't enjoy it. And that's why he's always looking for ways to compromise it secretly.

That's why legalists are generally hypocrites. They say one thing and they do another. The reason they do another is because they don't really like what they say.

They don't really like to live under that standard themselves, but they just feel under bondage to it. Legalism is a bondage, the Bible says. And, I mean, Phariseeism is bondage.

And being under the law is bondage. And for that reason, there is a joyless service to God and joyless obedience to God. You can always tell if it's joyless by the fact that they criticize others for not doing it.

You know, it is one thing to say Christians should not do what God said, but when someone says, well, you know, I gave up all my money to serve Jesus Christ, and I just can't bear with these people who drive fancy cars and live in big houses. Well, you know, those people who drive fancy cars and live in big houses, maybe there is something they need to be considering. Maybe they should look at the words of Jesus a little more carefully.

Who knows? But I don't begrudge it to them. You know why? Because I don't envy them. I mean, if they've got a problem where they're not obeying Christ as much as they should be, that is a problem.

It's their problem. I mean, I can share it with them, but it's not my problem to make me resentful toward them or something like that. The only way I would tend to be resentful toward someone is if I really didn't like obeying God myself.

If someone decided in our fellowship we don't believe that drinking coffee is okay. Now, believe me, I'm not there. I drink coffee all the time.

I just had a big cup before I came here today. But suppose I was in a group of people and we decided to not drink coffee, and suddenly we found out someone over there was drinking coffee, and we got very angry at that and resentful about it. Well, probably the reason we're resentful is because I'm not drinking coffee, and I really wish I was.

And I didn't like giving it up. And if I've got to give it up, by golly, they'd better give it up too. Now, real obedience to Jesus Christ is supposed to be out of love.

And if you love Christ, then you'd love to do His will. And if somebody else isn't doing it,

you don't begrudge them. You certainly pity them for one thing, that they haven't found the joy in following Christ that you have.

You may have to correct them, but you don't do so with spite toward them because you don't envy them. If you love eating chocolate ice cream, and you meet someone who doesn't like chocolate ice cream, you might be amazed. You might pity them that they don't enjoy it like you do, but you don't get angry at them for not eating chocolate ice cream.

The reason is because you don't have any resentment about it. You enjoy it. You eat it because you like it.

And if you obey God because you love God, then you're happy to obey Him. You're happy to serve Him. And if you find people who don't do so quite as thoroughly, it's not a matter of you feeling superior or disdainful toward them.

You would, of course, pity them. And you might want to bring correction if that's possible to them. But the joyless obedience, the joyless service of the legus is seen in the fact that he's so condemning and hostile toward others who aren't doing what he really wishes he could be doing, but his laws won't let him do.

Now, grace, on the other hand, of course, is something that we understand pretty much as God's benevolence toward us. God has grace towards us. We're saved by His grace toward us.

He forgives us. He accepts us. He gives all His riches to us at Christ's expense, not by our doing anything to deserve it.

It comes to us strictly through faith, the Bible says. We're saved by grace through faith. And it's not by doing laws or keeping any codes.

We are accepted in the Beloved when we have surrendered to God by a genuine kind of faith. And that brings grace into our life, which is our salvation. But when grace comes into our life, it's more than just God's benevolence.

It is God's power in His character, too. God is full of grace. And when we're full of God and receive His grace, then we're full of grace.

And grace teaches us, Paul told Titus, that denied ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world. That's what grace teaches us. Grace itself imposes on our inward man a standard of holiness.

And when you meet somebody who doesn't inwardly have a desire to be holy and to renounce the world and follow Jesus Christ, you've met a person who is... It's not that they need some laws. They need some grace. Because grace would teach them that.

What they lack is grace, not laws. Now, they might lack laws, too. But laws are not what they need.

They don't need to be put under a legalistic standard. They need to understand and receive the grace of God, which will transform them. That will cause His laws to be written on their hearts so that by nature they will desire to do the thing that pleases God.

That's what grace does. Some people say, well, I don't need to obey God because I'm under grace. Well, that's not quite understanding what grace is.

Grace teaches you inwardly. It teaches you to obey God. So that you don't really need the imposition of a lot of laws, or any laws, really, except the law of love, which is grace itself.

Now, I want to talk about wisdom now because many of the things that I advocate when I teach in terms of lifestyle changes are... I would say I don't believe they're legalistic. I believe they have to do with wisdom. But we need to understand what wisdom is.

We don't want to mistake it for legalism, and we don't want to just have no idea of what it is at all either. First of all, wisdom is... Let me see if I can find where I've written this down so I can put it more succinctly than I would ordinarily do, probably. Here we go.

Wisdom is that quality that takes into account the true nature of things, gives them their proper value, and foresees remote consequences, and adopts the life patterns in harmony with that knowledge. Now, in other words, if you know that... Let's say you know that smoking cigarettes is not good for your health. Now, this is not a great example because sometimes smoking cigarettes isn't always bad for people's health.

Some people are 99 years old and smoke six packs a day. I'm exaggerating. Three packs a day.

And they never had a sick day in their life. You can't really tell someone, if you smoke cigarettes, you're going to get sick because that's not always true. Some people smoke cigarettes and they don't get sick.

But you can say this with certainty. Smoking cigarettes is not a healthy habit. It's not a good use of money.

It's a wasteful habit. It offends many people. The smell offends many non-smokers with whom you must associate.

And it could very well promote disease in your life. Now, all those things being true, we can't say the Bible says, thou shalt not smoke because it does not. And I can never condemn a person who does smoke.

But I could counsel in wisdom and say, listen, the things that... If you understand the nature of reality, if you understand the remote consequences for your choices that you make, if you understand how to bring your life into conformity with the laws that God put in the universe, smoking isn't one of the more wise things you can do. Now, a legalist would say, we're not going to let anyone smoke in this fellowship. That's not okay.

That's adding to the word of God. The Bible doesn't say, thou shalt not smoke. But we can say to all Christians, smoking is one of the things that probably isn't.

But I use the example of smoking because it's not likely to get too many people saying, wait a minute, Steve, I actually think smoking is good for people. Now, what about some other issues? What if we said, I believe parents should be much more protective of their children than they generally are. I really think it's a wise thing to homeschool children rather than send them off with other children who aren't saved or even other children who are saved but who themselves may be subject to various corruptions in their homes.

Now, a lot of people are going to say, no, wait a minute. You know, that's legalistic. Well, only if I say that God has commanded you to homeschool, I don't say that.

God has not commanded anyone to homeschool that I'm aware of. But God has said that you shall teach your children the ways of God when you rise up and when you walk with them in the way and when you sit down and when you lie down at night and when you're eating all day long. You're supposed to be teaching your children the ways of God.

It seems to me like homeschooling would be a very wise choice if you want to do what God said. It's also wise if you understand how impressionable children are and how easily they pick up bad things and how slowly they pick up good things. The Bible says that.

The Bible says foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child. If you understand that to be true, that's the nature of reality. Children are born with a tendency toward foolishness.

And it also says in the Scripture, the companion of fools will suffer harm. Now, if I say, okay, the Bible says children are born foolish and anyone who keeps companionship with fools is going to hurt for it. And my children, if I send them off to school, they're going to hang out with other kids in whom foolishness is bound up.

Then they'll be companions of fools and therefore they're going to suffer harm. Maybe I won't do that. Because if I'm wise, I don't want to do things that are going to cause unnecessary harm.

A person who is wise has some idea of what kinds of goals he's after and can perceive what the better choices would be to lead to those goals. That person may actually make some decisions that are not commanded in Scripture. And he cannot require other Christians to do the same.

But if he wants to be wise, he will often go beyond what is mandated. You know, you might say, well, how can we go beyond what's mandated? Many times in the Bible, we read that a godly person will go beyond even what God commands. You read 1 Corinthians 9 someday.

Paul says, listen, me and Barnabas, he says, we have the right to marry. We've chosen not to for the sake of the Gospel. We have the right to eat and drink whatever we want to, but some things we might eat and drink might offend some people.

And for the sake of the Gospel, we've chosen not to eat and drink everything that might be lawful to us. We have the right to be paid for the Gospel, he says, but we don't use these rights. Even though God, he said, has ordained that those that preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel, he says, that may be what God has said.

I have the right to live of the Gospel, but I choose not to. I can go beyond what God has required. And here's how Paul put it.

He says, if I preach the Gospel, that's no big deal. He says necessity is put upon me. Woe is me if I don't preach the Gospel.

I'm under obligation to do that. But he says, I want to give God more than even what He demands. He has not demanded that I preach the Gospel without charge.

He has imposed on me the obligation to preach the Gospel. And if I don't do that, I'm in trouble with God. But he hasn't said I have to do it without charge.

And so, I'm going to do it without charge so I can go beyond what God has required. Paul told Philemon, in the book of Philemon, he says, knowing your obedience in all things, and so forth, he says, I know that you will do even more than what I'm asking you to do. Now, we don't know exactly what he expected Philemon to do, but Philemon was the kind of Christian that Paul said, I'm asking you to do this, and I know you well enough to know you'll probably do more than what you're required to do.

Why? Because a legalist will do only as much as he's required to do. He'll stay as carnal as he can. He'll still maintain as much of a lifestyle that's convenient and self-indulgent as he can and stay within the perimeters of whatever he defines to be the law.

That's legalism. But a person who is animated by grace and wants to walk in wisdom, that person will say, well, God hasn't forbidden me to do this, but actually, of the various choices, putting this restriction on myself, putting this inconvenience on myself, is actually more likely to lead to the results that I'm looking for and I think God's looking for. You know, Paul said a couple times in 1 Corinthians, once was in 1 Corinthians 6 and another time was in 1 Corinthians 10, he said, all things are lawful to me, but not all things are expedient.

Now, that's interesting. Expedient means conducive to getting the results you want. Now, he was talking in those places about food, because he was discussing the issue of whether it's legal in the sight of God to eat meat sacrificed to idols.

He said, well, it's really lawful. God doesn't mind if you eat it, but it's not always expedient. For one thing, you might stumble brothers.

That's not good. And for another thing, you might get lured back into idolatry if you do what you used to do and eat in the idol temples and so forth. So, he said, these things may not be all that wise.

You see, wisdom tells me not what I must do or must not do. It tells me what is the expedient thing to do. What is the thing that will be most conducive to getting the results that are desirable? That is what wisdom does.

So, when I tell people, you know, I really think you ought to consider homeschooling your kids instead of sending them to school. I really don't. I'm not going to judge them if they don't.

I might pity them if they don't, because I expect they'll probably have more problems with their kids than they would otherwise have. Not that homeschooling... Let me tell you something. Homeschooling is not the whole answer.

I have... I know of five or six families right now, godly Christian families, five or six, who have homeschooled their children since kindergarten and have had serious problems in recent years with their teenagers. In Idaho, where I live, there's a family of six or seven kids and their teenage daughter tried to commit suicide last week. Three ways at once.

Serious problem. This is a godly family, but the girl's not a Christian. She was homeschooled all the time.

I know of another family that lives out toward Portland from here, homeschooled eight or nine kids from little up, and one of their boys has just announced that he doesn't believe in the resurrection of Christ anymore. And he loves his parents. They're pretty well bonded to the family.

He just hasn't bought into their faith. Homeschooling doesn't guarantee that your kids will be Christians. It doesn't guarantee that you'll have no trouble with them.

But I'll tell you this. All other things being equal, you'll buy yourself fewer problems homeschooling them than sending them out to be among fools in their young form of years. You'll still have struggles.

Raising kids is a challenge. And when they get to be teenagers, especially, they have a will of their own in many respects. Of course, that's as it should be.

But the idea is if you want to form their wills while they're young, you'll have more success, a higher degree of success, if you have more total supervision over that formation of their early lives than if you don't have that supervision. You farm it out to public schools or whatever. Now, did I say that people sin if they don't homeschool? Of course not.

I don't believe it's a sin not to homeschool. I just don't think it's very wise. I don't think it's as wise.

If our goal is to have godly offspring, then what is conducive to that goal? Is it lawful to send my kids to public school? Yes, but not expedient. Many things are lawful that are not expedient. If I'm a legalist, I just want to consider myself, what am I allowed to do? How much inconvenience can I avoid myself and still be within the perimeters of what God commands? That's legalism.

Wisdom is, okay, God hasn't said exactly how I have to educate my kids, but I need to figure out what's the way that will be most expedient to getting godly results from them. And that will lead me to make choices that maybe go beyond even what I'm commanded to make. There's a lot of issues like that.

Betrothal instead of dating. I actually don't see a direct statement of Scripture that says that young people can't date, depending on how that's interpreted. There's certainly things that the Bible does forbid that a lot of young people do when they date.

But in terms of just a young man going out with a young woman for dinner and talking, getting to know each other, getting to like each other a little bit, and then taking her home and all is moral and clean and so forth. I mean, the Bible doesn't say that that's a wrong thing to do. However, there's a number of people, and I'm in their camp, that believe it's not a very wise way.

First of all, I have known very few, and if you're one of the exceptions to this generality, fine. I know there are exceptions. There are just very few.

I know very few people, including myself, who dated in the traditional way, even as Christians, and remained as pure as they could have remained if they had done something differently. Now, I really think that modern Christians aren't as concerned about being pure as ancient Christians were, and as Jesus is. But, let me show you something here.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul said in verse 3, For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you should abstain from fornication, or immorality, sexual immorality, that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles, which know not God. That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter, or in this matter, some translations say,

because that the Lord is the avenger of all such as we have forewarned you and testified. Now, Paul says the will of God is that you be sexually pure, that you be holy.

Sanctified means holy. And these things are the things that God has revealed His will. Now, he didn't say this is the will of God that young people do not date.

But as a parent with teenage children, and I have two going on three teenage children pretty soon, I have to make a decision. I am still the one that God has given them to be their guide until the time that they are launched out of my home to start their own families. Until they are out of my home, I have an obligation to give them some guidance about things.

And those that are at the age where they can actually be legitimately attracted to the opposite sex, I have to give them some guidelines. Now, I can just tell them as some people do, their children, you know, don't have sex. Don't touch below the shoulders or whatever.

I mean, some parents give these kinds of instructions to their kids. And you know what? Some kids, you know, they obey those instructions and things go reasonably well. I am not going to tell you that every time couples have dated that it has turned out to be a moral disaster.

That would be too much of a broad brush. That isn't the case. However, I have known of no moral disasters among families that practice biblical betrothal.

I have known very few cases of dating, even among Christians, that did not lead to moral compromise. And when I say moral compromise, my standard might be a little higher than what some people are. But some parents may just be relieved if their parents get through the teen years and get themselves married and they are still virgins.

Physically. I was a virgin when I got married the first time. But not mentally.

And I was exposed to many things growing up in my parents' home who were Christians. We had a TV on, for example. Not a good idea.

is it legalism to say that Christians can't have a TV in their home? Yes, I would say that is legalism. If someone says, Christians should not have a television, you can go further. You can say, Christians should not watch videos.

Christians should not listen to the radio. Christians should not ever see magazine covers. Christians should never go outside.

Christians should never talk to non-Christians. I mean, you can get as legalistic as you want about this and it is plain legalism. But we could say this, and it would not be legalism, TV can be a bondage and it can be a trap.

And it is for many, many people. And one reason that I have never had a television in my home in my life, after leaving my parents' home, there was one there, but as an adult who left home 30 years ago, I have never had a TV. And the reason is not because I am legalistic.

It is not because I am too righteous to have a television. It is because I am not righteous enough to have one. If I was righteous enough, it would not hurt me to have one.

But I am not righteous enough. And I am just wise enough at this point, I am not as wise as I could be, but I am wise enough to know this, that a TV in my home is not conducive to the goals I have for my life, for my stewardship of God's time, for my children's stewardship of God's time or their minds. I mean, it is just wisdom.

It is not legalism. It is wisdom. What I would say is what I see in the modern evangelical church in America is very little wisdom.

Now, let me say this. Some of you probably have TVs in your homes. I do not want to give your kids the idea that you are necessarily doing something wrong.

Some people are more righteous than I am. And I am not saying that sarcastically. It would not be hard to be more righteous than I am.

And there are people who can have a TV and they literally do not ever abuse it. They never waste any time. They only watch such programs as they know are spiritually edifying or have some positive educational benefit to their families and never do anything else with it.

Believe me, I have no interest whatsoever in condemning you for having a TV or even watching a TV. But I've met very few people of whom that could be said. I've met... I don't know if I've ever met people.

I may have. I don't remember meeting anyone who had a TV and didn't waste any time of God's time, by the way. Didn't watch commercials that had mostly naked women on them.

Didn't watch any shows that had immoral themes or bad language. And didn't let their children see any of the same. I just haven't met many Christians who have had that kind of strength.

If you've got it, then you've got my blessing to have TV in every room. I don't recommend it. It's a matter of wisdom.

It's what it's a matter of. It's just like Christians saying, well, listen, you know, we don't have a tendency to get drunk around here, but we don't want any alcohol in the house. Fine.

The Bible doesn't say you can't have alcohol in your house, but it's a very wise suggestion. Eve made a very wise suggestion. We said we can't even touch that fruit.

Very wise. The problem is she didn't seem to realize that God hadn't said that. And so, her suggestions were at the same level as God's in her own mind.

And therefore, she was involved in legalism, adding to the Word of God. If, however, Adam had told her, listen, God said we shouldn't eat it. Let me tell you what I'm going to suggest.

Let's don't even touch it. Now, it's not that God has said we can't touch it, but that's smart not to touch. You start handling that thing, you're going to be more tempted to eat it.

Let's don't even touch it. That's wise. That's wisdom.

There are Christians who say drunkenness is a sin. Therefore, we will not even handle alcohol. We won't taste it.

We won't have it in our house. That's wise. I think that's a great idea.

But it's not something that can be imposed as a law from God. I really think our children need to know what God said as opposed to what man said. There is a difference between the laws of God and the rules of our home.

That is, the rules of our home may actually be more strict in some ways than some of the things God commanded. God gives very generic laws of morality for all people. We might want to get more specific and say, now, you kids, we don't want you even to read this kind of literature.

We don't want you to read these comic books. We don't want you to do this, that. Now, we want to make it clear.

God didn't say you can't do that, but God has told us that we need to be holy in thought and in deed. And we really want you to be preserved from those things that war against the soul. If you know you're in a warfare, and eternity is the stakes of that warfare, and you do not guard yourself against things that war against the soul, you're not very wise.

We're talking wisdom. Okay? And wisdom is different than legalism, as I said. Let me make one final point, or two final points about wisdom, and I'm going to wrap this up.

God's highest will about any given thing is also the highest wisdom. In other words, God is wise and benevolent, and what He wants most we will find to be the wisest course. We might say, well, God says this, but I really want to do something else than what God said.

Well, you'll find that anything else than what God said is foolish. It's not wise. Because

God is wisdom, and His will, what He wants, is always the wisest thing.

And of course, if you don't follow the wisest course, you'll end up doing what is not expedient. That is, it doesn't produce the results that you should be seeking in your spiritual life or that of your family or that of whatever else it is you've committed to God and want to see His results in. There's a Scripture about that I'd like you to be aware of in Ephesians 5, verse 17.

Ephesians 5, verse 17. Actually, there's a whole lot of Scriptures in my notes I'm not going to for the sake of being a little bit more brief, but a few Scriptures I do want you to see. In Ephesians 5, verse 17, Paul said, and this is a very well-known verse, he says, Wherefore, be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.

Now, notice the dichotomy here. You either understand what the will of the Lord is, or else you are unwise. Those are the two choices.

That obviously equates the will of the Lord with wisdom. If you understand what the will of the Lord is, you are wise. If you don't understand what the will of the Lord is, you're unwise.

God's will is always the highest wisdom. And that means that however smart the sinner may think he is by outsmarting God and going and doing it and running around the commandments of God and doing his own thing, it's never really smart. Sin is not smart.

There's no wisdom in sin. Because sin has remote consequences that God knows about and that we don't. And no one is wise who takes a course of action that is disregarding remote consequences.

That just isn't smart to do. We have to realize that when God gives us commands or when He sets a standard for us, it is because He is the wisest one and He knows the best route to the best place to be. God's desire for us is always good.

He says in Jeremiah 29, 11, For I know the thoughts that I think toward you. Some translations say, I know the plans that I have planned for you. These are thoughts of peace and not of evil to give you an expected end.

God says, I have plans for your good, for your benefit, ultimately for your peace. And I know how to get there from here. And the commands I've given you reflect the most expedient way.

So, obedience to God is always the highest wisdom. Now, a lot of the things that I teach in this series that I teach on the radically Christian counterculture are very down to earth, very nitty gritty kind of stuff of family and finance and other issues that God had a lot to say about and that modern Christians don't follow very well. I think not because they're necessarily rebellious, but because I think they've never been taught.

They've never been taught what the Bible says on a lot of these subjects. A lot of these things are very practical, down to earth things, which, as I said, most Christians don't know or care to know in some cases. They don't want to follow them when they hear them and are likely to say, that's legalistic.

It's not legalistic. It is simply taking stock of the nature of reality, recognizing what goals are legitimate goals to set, and finding the most expedient course to get from here to there. That's what wisdom is.

Now, what if I'm not wise? Am I going to go to hell for making a foolish decision? Well, not necessarily. That's the difference between legalism and wisdom. Legalism is, here's the law.

If you don't keep that law, you are condemned. Wisdom says, here's wisdom. Follow it its way.

If you don't follow wisdom, you may not be condemned, but you will experience consequences. Foolish choices may not always bring with them condemnation, but they will always bring with them consequences. That's a very important distinction to make and it's something very important to take stock of.

Let me just show you some Scripture. I'd like you to look at these with me because these illustrate this fact biblically. Psalm 107, verse 17.

It says, Fools, because of their transgression and because of their iniquities, are afflicted. Now, affliction is something we'd like to avoid. It's one of those things we'd like to take as wise a course as possible.

It would avoid this result of affliction. We don't want to bring unnecessary affliction on us. Affliction from God, it can be good for us.

We don't want to bring it on us unnecessarily. But fools, it says, because of their transgression, their iniquity, they experience affliction. And the impression is they experience affliction that they wouldn't otherwise have to experience if it wasn't for their iniquity and transgression, which they do because they're fools, because they lack wisdom, because they're not following the course of wisdom.

They bring affliction upon themselves, the result of foolish behavior. It may be without condemnation, but it is not without consequences. Look at Proverbs chapter 1. Of course, you're going to find a lot in Proverbs.

I won't take you to all the possible places we can look in Proverbs on this subject of wisdom. But maybe a couple of places would be, or a few places would be useful. In Proverbs 1, in verse 32, it says, For the turning away of the simple shall slay them.

Simple is a synonym in Proverbs for the foolish. The turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. That is, if fools are successful in doing what they want to do, they'll destroy themselves.

Foolishness is foolishness because it is out of touch with certain realities. A fool very often is a person who wants immediate gratification without thinking about long-term consequences. That's foolish.

Very foolish. Very common. Very easy to do, but very foolish.

And anyone who's thinking immediately, how can I be happy right now? How can I... Someone who's looking to get out of an unhappy marriage, divorce. Our society says, Listen, you deserve some happiness. Get out of that marriage while you're still young enough to find another marriage to get happy in.

And, you know, if you don't please yourself, no one else is going to do it. Well, people who make those choices are foolish. They don't follow God's ways, and they bring upon themselves disaster after disaster on their family and on their own lives.

And there's very few people who divorce or marry once without having to divorce or feeling the need to divorce or marry again and again and again. Now, there are some who don't do it repeatedly, but you find that the moral fiber is broken down so that resistance to future temptation and future sin is weakened by making short-term selfish choices. And the number of other people whose lives are destroyed by divorce are seen to... But the person who wants out now of an unhappy marriage, so they take the easy way, the immediate gratification, Let's get out of this marriage, let's get a divorce, but they're not seeing because they can't see.

We don't see the future. We can speculate, but we can't see the long-term consequences. But God can.

When God says, don't do this kind of thing, it is because He can see what we can't see, and we're fools if we ignore His foresight and His command. There are consequences. In Proverbs 10, verse 8, it says, The wise in heart will receive commandments, but a preying fool shall fall.

A wise person, when he hears what God has commanded, will receive it. Because he is wise. This is best for me.

What God says is really what's best all around. It's going to be the most expedient thing. A preying fool is going to have trouble.

He's going to fall. There will be consequences for his foolishness. Chapter 13 of Proverbs.

Just two more verses here I want to give you. Proverbs 13, verse 20. He that walketh

with wise men shall be wise, but the companion of fools shall be destroyed.

The companion of fools will be destroyed. Why? Because they're going to be destroyed. If you walk with them, you end up where they end up walking.

You go on their path, you end up at their destination. You walk with fools, and you are a fool. I mean, that's really what it suggests there.

Because the first part is, those who walk, the companion of wise men will become wise. You hang out with wise men, you become wise. What's the opposite? Hang out with fools? Well, you become a fool.

And what happens to fools? They suffer harm. They are destroyed. And if you hang out with fools, that's going to be your end too.

Now, what this is just pointing out is what I said. That there are consequences for making foolish choices. You may hang out with fools and make some very unwise decisions.

You may end up going to heaven in the end. But you will not go there without having some hurts, some scars. You might not go there at all because if you are foolish enough, you might just get far enough from wisdom that you don't have the wisdom to turn back.

And many there have been who have been just that foolish. One other verse for you tonight is Proverbs 19 and verse 29. Proverbs 19 and 29.

Judgments are prepared for scorners and stripes for the back of fools. Now, this is what fools can look forward to. They can expect discipline.

That's what stripes refers to. The imagery is of a master disciplining a disobedient servant. In those days, it was not uncommon to beat a servant who was unruly and rebellious.

And so, that imagery is used. You can expect a beating from God. You can expect discipline from God.

You can expect stripes. And maybe even not from God. Maybe from man in some cases.

You make the wrong decisions and you're going to come to smart for it. You're going to suffer for it. There will be consequences of it.

Now, He's not saying you're going to go to hell. As a matter of fact, receiving stripes might be the thing that will turn you around so you don't go to hell. But wouldn't it be nicer to go to heaven without the stripes? Wouldn't it be nicer to be uncondemned and free from those consequences that seem to cling to the life of a person who makes foolish decisions in their youth? I want to tell you something.

I lived a more wholesome, youthful life than most people I know. I dare say some of you who probably lived more wholesomely than I did. But probably most of you didn't.

And I have lived a reasonably wholesome adult life. I don't want to boast because I've made some terrible mistakes too. Both in my youth and in my adult life.

A lot of them I didn't have to make. I could have sought counsel from godly Christians when I didn't bother to when I was younger. I could have fought through biblical issues a little more and understood a little bit better how to maybe go against the grain even of the church I was in in order to avoid some of the traps that people my age were falling into.

There are things I could have done. I could have been wiser. And that's the point I'm making.

I'm not going to hell. I'm going to heaven. I'm not condemned.

I'm forgiven. I'm under grace. I'm not under law.

But I still have scars. I have scars. I have corruptions.

I have struggles and challenges that I didn't need to invite into my life because I was in some respects a fool. I wasn't as foolish as some people I knew but I was not as wise as I should have been. Depart from the path of wisdom and you will have consequences.

These consequences may linger. You may not be condemned. Ultimately.

But you will have consequences and they will be consequences that are definitely worthy to be avoided if possible. We need to seek the wisdom of God and we need to recognize that we live in a foolish age. An age that is turned from God.

The fear of the Lord, it says in Proverbs 9, 10, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And therefore, a society that does not fear God has neither the beginning nor middle part nor end of wisdom. It has no wisdom at all.

And therefore, we ought to look at the world out there that has rejected God and say whatever they're doing is probably plain stupid. Whatever they're thinking, whatever they're valuing, whatever they're pursuing, whatever they want to advise me to do, they're probably wrong. Now, I mean, they might get it right by accident once in a while.

I'm not saying they can't balance their checkbooks or something, but there are some things that unbelievers can get right. But the wise believer needs to look at the society out there that's living its life without God and say whatever it is they think is probably wrong. And whatever I thought before I was a Christian and brought with me into my Christian life is very likely wrong too.

And I'd better re-examine everything from the Word of God. And I may end up coming up with some pretty wild conclusions vis-a-vis the thinking of the Christians around me, but better to have opinions and practices in my life that are wild and fringe in the eyes of other Christians, but are right on target according to God. Because on the Day of Judgment, I'm not going to have to answer those other Christians.

And I'm certainly not going to have to answer those in the world. I'm going to have to answer to God. And I need to be wise.

Not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. To be an advocate of a different path, a stricter path, a holier path, even than that which the commonality of Christians are following is not necessarily legalism. It is wisdom though.

And I would like to highly recommend it.