**God Behaving Badly - Week 1 - Legalistic or Gracious?**

**Message Big Idea:** When we read certain stories in the Old Testament, it’s hard not to wonder… Is God legalistic or gracious?

**Scripture:** Genesis 1:28a, Genesis 2:16-17, Genesis 3, Deuteronomy 30:11-20, Matthew 5:17-18

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****Introduction**

*(Picture)* If you have the Bible app on your phone, do you ever open it to see the “Verse of the Day”? You can even have that verse sent to you daily. It’s meant to be encouraging, inspirational, or even sometimes a bit challenging. The verse of the day can help you get through the next 24 hours and maybe even help you to become a little more like Jesus in the process. For example, *(point to screen)* this “Verse of the Day” reminds us that love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

We could probably all just pack up and go home right now and work on loving like that. I know I need that.

However, there are certain verses in the Bible that never seem to make the “Verse of the Day” cut. For example,

* This gem from Leviticus 19: **“Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of linen.” -Leviticus 19:19b**.Back in the 1970s, that verse could have warned people against wearing *(add picture)* **polyester blend leisure suits**. I mean, come on, God knew that was a bad idea 6,000 years ago!
* Here’s another “Verse of the Day” rejection: **“Do not let your hair be unkempt...or you will die and the Lord will be angry with the whole community.” -Leviticus 10:6**.Wow, some of you guys in the room right now would be in serious trouble! I see some of you doing this… *(imitate licking your fingers and trying to smooth hair)*.
* Or here’s another overlooked verse from Exodus: **“Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.” -Exodus 23:19b**. *(Pause)*I gotta admit, I got nothing on this one! Thanks for the advice? I totally don’t know.

My point is there are some pretty bizarre commands in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. It’s one of the reasons some people view the Bible as a collection of ridiculous rules and see God as a crazy cosmic cop who’s just trying to keep everyone in line. It’s why a lot of people want nothing to do with God, especially the God of the Old Testament.

**Series Recap**

*(Series Graphic)* Today we’re beginning a new series called **“God Behaving Badly.”** This series is based on a book with the same name by author and Old Testament professor, David T. Lamb. Over the next four weeks, we’re going to tackle some of the difficult and confusing passages we find in the Old Testament of the Bible and try to make sense of the seemingly contradictory pictures of God that we see there.

We’re going to ask:

* Is God violent or peaceful?
* Is God angry or loving?
* Is God sexist or empowering?

And we’re kicking the series off today by asking: Is God **Legalistic or Gracious?**

Before we dive in, let me note something about how we’re going to to refer to God during this series. At times in the Old Testament, God is simply referred to as “God” or “Lord.” However, by far, over 6,800 times, God is referred to by his personal name, **“Yahweh”**. Say that after me… Yahweh *(Yahweh).* In our English Bibles, this name, Yahweh, is typically translated with small capital letters that say *(add)* **“the lord”**.

Why is the predominant use of this name “Yahweh” significant? Well, I believe it tells us something about the heart of God. I believe it tells us God wants to be on a first-name basis with his people. There is something personal about calling someone by their first name, isn’t there? God desires *that* kind of intimacy with his people. And this is important because what we believe about God will directly affect how we either pursue him or avoid him.

So during this series, when we talk about God in the Old Testament, we’re going to use his name, Yahweh. Let it be a reminder to us that even as we wrestle through difficult, confusing passages, that Yahweh is a God who desires intimate relationship with us. Interesting enough, the people in the Old Testament who knew Yahweh best desperately desired to be near him. What did they understand about him that we can discover over these next four weeks?

**Is Yahweh Legalistic?**

So let’s jump into our first question: Is Yahweh **Legalistic or Gracious?**

With so many commands that seem obscure, demanding, and no fun, some read the Bible and conclude that Yahweh must be legalistic.

Legalism is an excessive adherence to the law. It’s a belief that we can earn or keep favor by what we do. When we see God as a legalist, we might picture him as a basketball referee looking for infractions. A referee never stops the game and says, “Good shot!” No, referees stand ready to blow the whistle when anyone breaks a rule.

So why do so many people view Yahweh as legalistic? I believe there are a few reasons…

**Reason #1 – There are so many commands.**

First, a person might conclude that Yahweh is legalistic because the Old Testament contains so many laws, a lot of which seem to be super random.

There are laws about what to eat, what to wear, how to worship, how to build things, and so on.

It can seem like there are way too many laws, but consider this: ***we*** have a ton of laws. Sure, there are some laws we don’t like…like trying to drive 25 MPH in certain zones…it’s really hard to drive a car 25 MPH, isn’t it? Sometime we don’t like being restricted by laws, but we recognize that the laws are there for our good.

The Old Testament contains so many laws because the people of Israel needed a legal system in order to establish a healthy and just society. Just because the Old Testament contains a lot of laws, doesn't mean that Yahweh is legalistic.

And, yes, some of the laws seem random when we read them with 21st century eyes. I have no idea why it wasn’t OK to wear clothing woven of two kinds of linen or to cook a goat in its mother’s milk…although I feel like that last one should still be a law today!

There are some laws in the Old Testament that were addressing particular problems in a culture that we no longer understand.

Think of it this way… If I said to you today, *“Don’t buy Sports Illustrated in early February,”* my guess is most males in the room understand why I might share that wisdom. In the 21st century, the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue comes out right after the Super Bowl in February, and if you are someone who wants to avoid the sin of lust, it’s probably wise to avoid that.

But my guess is in the year 5019, if someone finds my message notes for today’s talk, and just reads, *“Don’t buy Sports Illustrated in early February”* they aren’t going to understand what it means. In three thousand years, roughly how distant we are from these Old Testament laws, that command will probably sound as random as a command to not wear clothes woven with two kinds of linen.

Just because there are a lot of commands and some of them seem random does not mean Yahweh is legalistic.

**Reason #2 – There are so many restrictive commands.**

Yet another reason some people think Yahweh is legalistic is he seems to want to spoil all our fun and rain on our parade. If you’ve ever felt like this, you’re not alone. In fact, human beings have been distrustful of the motives behind Yahweh’s commands since the beginning of time.

*(Genesis 3:1-5)* All the way back in the Garden of Eden, the serpent comes to the woman and asks, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?” He’s planting a seed to get Eve to question whether she can really trust in God’s goodness. Maybe Yahweh doesn’t have her best interest in mind? Maybe he’s holding out on her?

Temptation will always question the goodness of Yahweh’s commands. Like Adam and Eve, we often don’t recognize the consequences of our sin until it is too late.

Yes, Yahweh’s commands might place some restrictions on our lives, but Yahweh isn’t out to spoil our fun. He’s not legalistic.

**Reason #3 – There are so many legalistic Christians.**

But there is a third reason why many people think Yahweh is legalistic, and it has nothing to do with what read about him in the Old Testament. Do you want to know what it is? It’s because there are so many legalistic Christians.

What does legalism look like in Christians?

* Legalism is believing that I can earn my way to heaven by doing good deeds and avoiding bad ones.
* Legalism is trying to be right with God by paying him back for the wrong things I’ve done.
* Legalism can be thinking God loves me more than other people because I do a better job at obeying his laws than my neighbor.

It can be our distorted views of Yahweh and his commands that lead people to think he is legalistic when, in fact, the exact opposite is true.

**The Goodness of Yahweh’s Commands**

Understand, Yahweh is good, and it is Yahweh’s goodness that forms the basis of his commands. He wants us to flourish and enjoy both his presence and his creation.

To illustrate this, let’s look at some of Yahweh’s first commands.

Yahweh’s very first command, the first time he speaks to humans, appears in the first chapter of Genesis.

**“Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it.” Genesis 1:28 NLT**

Stop for a second and think about that… Yahweh’s very first command to human beings is basically, “Have a lot of sex!” A few of you just perked up, didn’t you? ☺ That’s what it is! Yahweh says to be fruitful and multiply…to have sex and lots of it! Does that sound legalistic? I’ll go ahead and answer that for you: No!

OK, OK, maybe that first command was a fluke. Let’s continue. What about Yahweh’s second command?

**“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil…” Genesis 2:16b-17 NLT**

Let me get this straight… Yahweh starts out with, “Have a lot of sex!” and then follows it up with, “Eat a lot of food!” If you were dragged here today against your will, can I just ask you: Is this not the kind of God you want to follow? ☺

All kidding aside, what I want us to see is from the start Yahweh’s commands have always been rooted in the goodness of his character. Everything he created is for the enjoyment of human beings, including the gifts of sexuality and food. He wants us to flourish and enjoy both his presence and his creation.

Yahweh’s goodness is the foundation for every one of his laws. Every time we come across one of his commands, we should view the command through the lens of Yahweh’s goodness. We should view the command with the premise that it holds Yahweh’s wisdom for human flourishing.

To illustrate what I mean, let’s look at probably the most famous set of laws in the Old Testament: *(Heading)* **The Ten Commandments.**

I want us to look at some of these commandments through the lens of Yahweh’s goodness…to imagine how his laws might equip us to flourish. In fact, let’s look at the commandments on the screen, but instead of reading them as a list of “Do’s and Don’ts,” I want you to see them as a list of “Imagine if’s…”

(*add this verse -* Exodus 20:3-4) Yahweh says, “Imagine if you had intimate relationship with Me and only Me, the one true God. No more idols and all of the things that go with that...but a living relationship with the one who made all of this…”

(*switch verse -* Exodus 20:8) Imagine if you lived in a way where true rest is possible. Where rather than run ragged you enjoyed a serenity of heart and mind…

(*switch verse -* Exodus 20:12) Imagine if you lived in a way that you quickly and easily gave honor to your mother and father because of your love and respect for them. Imagine experiencing peace in your home...

(*switch verse -* Exodus 20:15) Imagine if you lived with no desire to take anything that doesn’t belong to you because, ultimately, you don’t need it anyway.

(*switch verse -* Exodus 20:16) Imagine if you lived with no need to tear people down with your words or actions...

(*switch verse -* Exodus 20:17) Imagine if you lived with no desire to have someone else’s life or stuff. Imagine feeling content.

Legalistic? Not hardly. Instead, we begin to see a tangible picture of human flourishing stemming from the goodness of Yahweh’s heart.

We need to start seeing the commands in Scripture through a different lens.

If you’re a parent in the room, think back to when you taught your kids to ride a bike. Even if you’re not a parent, think back to when you learned to ride a bike. When I first learned to ride a bike, my Dad told me “Mitchell, don’t go where I can’t see you.” He told me that because the streets around us were pretty hilly and cars went too fast down them. Maybe you had a similar experience. “Don’t go in the street” or “Don’t go play where I can’t see you.” Is that a legalistic command? No, it’s a command born out of goodness and love…from a parent’s desire to keep their children safe so they can flourish.

Or think of it this way… through the commands in Scripture, Yahweh is providing a fence that is intended to keep his children safe. Some children see fences as restrictive, but a fence actually provides kids a safe space to play freely without the danger of drifting away and getting lost or without allowing harmful outside forces to get in.

Yahweh’s commands are meant to establish a fence where as long as his people stay inside of that fence, they will experience goodness and favor. They will flourish. But if they get outside of that fence, the dangers of pain and turmoil increase exponentially.

Yahweh himself shares this perspective on his commands. Listen to what he said to the people of God as they were about to enter the Promised Land:

**“For I command you this day to love the Lord your God and to keep his commands, decrees, and regulations by walking in his ways. If you do this, you will live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you and the land you are about to enter and occupy.” Deuteronomy 30:16 NLT**

God tells his people that if they follow his commands, they will experience blessing.

**“But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and if you are drawn away to serve and worship other gods, then I warn you now that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live a long, good life in the land you are crossing the Jordan to occupy. –Deuteronomy 30:17-18 NLT**

There are consequences to ignoring God’s commands. And they Yahweh says:

**“Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!” –Deuteronomy 30:19 NLT**

The choice is ours: Life trusting in the goodness of Yahweh or life on our own outside the fence. Yahweh longs for us to choose the way that leads to a life that flourishes.

**Challenge: Change Your Views of God’s Commands**

I want to challenge us today to see the commands we find in Scripture not as restrictions meant to keep us in check, but as wisdom designed to help us flourish. Imagine if we were able to see God’s commands thru that lens.

*(Hebrews 13:4)* Imagine if we saw the command to **“keep the marriage bed pure”** not as an archaic restriction but as a way for us to flourish and have real intimacy with a spouse.

*(Malachi 3:10)* Imagine if we saw the command to **“bring the whole tithe”** not as God wanting our money, but as a way for us to find freedom from consumerism, idolatry, and greed by giving back to God.

*(Matthew 5:44)* Imagine if we saw the command to **“love your enemies”** not as a sign of weakness, but a way to experience real peace in a world that seems so divisive.

Imagine if we saw God’s Word not as a book of rules but rather a story revealing the depths of Yahweh’s love and goodness towards us.

Imagine the kind of transformation that might begin to take place in your heart when you begin to see Yahweh as being FOR you, not AGAINST you.

I realize this is a difficult challenge for some of us. Perhaps we’ve spent our entire lives seeing God as a basketball referee. But just consider for a moment what it would mean for you to come to understand that far from being legalistic, Yahweh is full of grace and longs for you to flourish. How might that change your view of Yahweh? How might that change your view of yourself?

**Conclusion: Psalm 119**

Here’s what I know to be true. God loves you deeply. Yahweh is for you. His dream is for all of us to flourish in life. When we choose to believe that, it transforms our motivation for obeying his commands. We will begin to understand the heart of the Psalmist who said:

**“Oh, how I love your law!
    I meditate on it all day long. “Psalm 119:97**

The Psalmist loved God’s laws because he loved God and trusted in God’s goodness. That’s where his motivation stemmed from. Following God’s laws meant that he would experience an ever-deepening, intimate relationship with God.

Love is always a supremely motivating factor. It’s true with God’s love for us and our love for God. A command born out of love precedes a response of obedience when that love is realized. Not fear or legalism, but goodness and love.

**Communion Idea**

God’s goodness and love form the foundation of his commands, and they also form the foundation for our relationship with him. Even though those commands were for our flourishing, we couldn’t keep them. No one could keep them all, except for one person in all of human history: Jesus. Jesus stands as the only person to keep the commands of God, yet he still suffered punishment. He suffered on the cross so that you and I, who didn’t keep the commands, could have a relationship with God.

**“He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.” Galatians 3:14**

In this moment of communion we are grateful that Jesus restored our relationship with God through his perfect obedience, even death.