Our youngest son Gabe is now 16 months old, and he’s beginning to be able to communicate a little better all the time. It’s great to see him get excited about finally being understood when he’s trying to tell us something. In the last few weeks, one of my favorite things is that if you whisper ‘I love you’ to him, he’ll whisper back to you. You can’t understand what he’s saying, but it’s fun all the same.

Here’s the thing. As Gabe’s parent who loves him, it’s one of those heartwarming things that makes me feel loved. But my one year old doesn’t understand love yet. He probably doesn’t understand the words we’re saying to him at all. He’s just mimicking what we’re doing. Gabe will have to get a little older before he really understands what we mean when we say we love him or be able to genuinely tell us that he loves us.

That experience has made me think a lot recently about the way we show God that we love him. Do we really, genuinely, love God or are we just going through the motions?

The Israelites often dealt with that very issue. They were often guilty of simply going through the motions of worshiping God instead of truly being devoted to him. The Israelites were more concerned about following all the rules than actually loving God.

When Jesus came, people began to notice that he was a different kind of rabbi. His followers were doing things that no one else did, things no other rabbi would allow their disciples to do. Jesus was doing and saying things that no one would ever dare to do or say in the Jewish culture.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus called a bunch of uneducated fishermen to be his disciples. That wasn’t the norm. Usually a rabbi would choose those who were promising as rabbis themselves. That meant people who were the cream of the crop in the rabbinical schools, people who stood out as great theologians or leaders. People like Saul of Tarsus later on.

People were astonished when the heard him teach, because he taught as one who had authority. That word authority means one who has the ability to choose, one who has jurisdiction or control over something. Jesus had a kind of authority and control over what he taught about that no human teacher of scripture could ever have.

The Jewish scribes were men like Rod and me. They could teach the Scriptures as men who had studied them and knew how to interpret them properly. They were smart capable teachers. Jesus was different. He was the author of those Scriptures.

Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, people that no one else would ever even associate with. He did not make his disciples fast when the Jewish leaders and even John’s disciples were fasting. Jesus was different in so many ways from the old school of thought, from the current Jewish leaders. As things like that went on, the Jewish leaders became more and more wary of Jesus. They started looking for a way to get rid of him. Then we see this:

**Mark 2:23–28 ESV — 23** One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. **24** And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”

You can imagine the scene here. The disciples were walking through the fields on a Saturday afternoon, and they got a little snacky. I used to work for a seed company in Illinois. Every year we had to walk the soybean fields to make sure the farmers had planted the right variety of beans and hadn’t mixed things up.

There were usually about six of us that would split up and walk all 30,000 acres once when the plants were flowering, and again right before harvest. It was boring and it was tiring walking through the sea of bean plants all day for weeks on end. We also got pretty hungry. During those years that I was on the road working for the seed company I had more than my share of gas station food. Not only is it awful for you, it’s also just plain awful.

The disciples were walking through fields on those dry, hot Mediterranean days, and they got the munchies. Soybeans are not the kind of thing you want to take off the plant and eat. But the kind of crops the disciples were walking through, like wheat, barley, and other grains, would probably make a decent snack.

You almost get the sense that the Pharisees were following Jesus and his disciples around just waiting to find something to pick at. They took the disciples snacking on some grain as an opportunity to attack Jesus. You get a sense of how petty this really was when you look at the foundation of their claim against him.

The Jewish people had spent centuries rejecting God, and then begging him for help when they got in trouble. They abandoned him over and over and worshiped other gods, until finally God sent them into exile in Babylon.

That was what finally got through to them. When they got back from exile they decided to get serious about following the law. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had this habit of being ultra-legalistic about everything they were commanded to do in Scripture.

There are 613 laws in the law of Moses. It seems like just following those would be difficult enough, but then they added to them. The Midrash is a book of additional teachings that came from rabbis that bolstered those 613 original laws. Essentially, they were trying to put a fence around the law of Moses so that you would never even get close to breaking the actual law.

The idea of the Sabbath comes from **Exodus 23:12 ESV — 12** “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed.

The whole point here was that people need to rest. This was an agrarian society, so the majority of people were in some kind of agricultural work. Farmers today work hard. I spent three summers working for a farm in college. If you don’t like hard work, choose a different career path. Farmers in the ancient world worked harder than most of us could ever imagine. All the things that are automated and done by machinery today were all done by manual, physical labor in the ancient world.

God designed us to need a time of rest. Today we can back that up with all kinds of scientific evidence about the necessity of sleep and rest and what it does to your mind and body if you don’t get it. Before any of that was around, God built that into the lives of his people.

He wanted to make sure they weren’t working 24/7. They were supposed to take the Sabbath day to refocus their lives on rest and on their worship of God. They were not supposed to work, cook, or clean on that day. The Sabbath was a day reserved for worship, family, and rest.

Over the years the rabbis added to the law. They added 39 new regulations that were all about how to keep the Sabbath day holy, none of which are in Scripture. All the way down to how many steps you could take on that day and still be considered to be keeping the Sabbath holy. This was before anyone had fitbits and fitness trackers. Imagine how hard that would be.

Apparently, that included reaching down and plucking the head off a stalk of grain while you were walking through a field. That’s about as much work as reaching into a bag of chips to have a snack or eating food off your plate at dinner time. The disciples weren’t out plowing fields or harvesting. They just grabbed some road food.

But that didn’t fit in with the Pharisee’s idea of what it meant to keep the Sabbath holy. The law was never so specific to say that plucking a head of grain qualified as work that broke the Sabbath. That was a rule the Pharisees added to the vast list of rules the Israelites were already supposed to follow.

This exactly what Jesus was talking when he said the Pharisees **Matthew 23:4 ESV — 4** …tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

This is what Peter was talking about when he challenged the leaders of the church in **Acts 15:10 ESV — 10** Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

The law was impossible enough to follow on its own. These leaders were adding to that and making following God a burden that was far too heavy for anyone to bear.

The Pharisees and Jewish leaders are painted as the bad guys of the New Testament. There were a few leaders at the top who orchestrated the death of Jesus and were only out for their own power. But by and large, the problem with the Pharisees wasn’t that they were evil men. Most of the Pharisees were trying to follow God as closely as they could. The Pharisees’ problem was that they missed the point.

The Pharisees thought the idea was to get to heaven by following all the rules. They were trying to earn their way to heaven by doing all the right things. (Picture of Sunday School Chart) Anybody remember these charts from Sunday School growing up? The Pharisees were trying to get enough gold stars to be considered good enough. They were trying to get to God through the law. Trying to be made right with God through the law. The problem is that no one can do that. No one was ever supposed to.

No one could ever follow the law closely enough or perfectly enough to be considered righteous. Paul made it very clear in Romans 3 that all of us have fallen short of the glory of God. All of us are sinful people and we all need saving. We don’t need to follow a list of rules that we know we’re going to fail at. We need someone who can save us from our sin and give us the spiritual life we desperately need. We all need a Savior.

The Pharisees were so focused on following every one of their rules that they didn’t even recognize that Jesus was that Savior. The people who knew the law better than anyone else, the people who should have recognized the Son of God when the saw him were totally oblivious to what was really happening because it didn’t fit in with their idea of what God wanted them to do. It didn’t fit in with their idea of how you get to God.

Jesus knew that to get into an argument with the Pharisees about what qualified as work wouldn’t help things. First, he probably wasn’t going to convince them anyway. It’s kind of like the arguments people get into on Facebook. Has anyone ever changed their mind because someone convinced them by arguing about it online? I highly doubt it.

But the bigger issue at stake here was their understanding of what their faith was all about. The Sabbath was never meant to be picked apart and used as a club to punish people who got hungry walking through a field. Again, the Pharisees missed the point.

**Mark 2:25–28 ESV — 25** And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: **26** how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?” **27** And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. **28** So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

In response to the criticism by the Pharisees, Jesus gave them an example that they couldn’t deny. David was called a man after God’s own heart. He was one of the heroes of the Jewish faith. David had just been warned by Jonathan that King Saul was trying to kill him, so David was running for his life. David had just left the city of Gibeah, where the King’s palace was, and he had no provisions or food for he and his men.

When they stopped in the town of Nob, which was near Jerusalem, they met with the priest Ahimelech. They needed food, but the only food available was the bread of the Presence. It was put out as an offering before God, and it was only for the priests to eat. David and his men were in trouble and they were hungry, so Ahimelech gave them some of the bread to eat.

None of the Pharisees condemned David because he and his men ate that bread, but here they were condemning his disciples because they plucked some grain on the Sabbath. Jesus was trying to show them how skewed their ideas of following God really were.

That’s when Jesus gives us this window into the way God wants his people to interact with him. He says **Mark 2:27 ESV — 27** …“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

The Pharisees were living by a checklist of things they had to do to be right with God. There are many people out there who treat their faith the same way today. So many people feel like they have to follow a checklist of all the right things to do, all the right things to celebrate, all the right things to say. They feel like doing things like reading their Bible, praying, or serving others are the things that make them right with God. If my good deeds outweigh my sins, then I’m a good person and God should let me into heaven. That’s not the Gospel.

All of those things are important. We talked about that just a couple of weeks ago at the end of the Letter to the Hebrews. The author of Hebrews encouraged his readers to continue showing love to each other, to keep themselves pure, to strive for holiness, and to remain faithful to God. Those things are incredibly important in our lives as followers of Jesus. But if our entire relationship with God revolves around the things we do, we, just like the Pharisees, have missed the point.

Our faith is meant to be more than just a checklist, more than just following a bunch of rules. Our faith is meant to be a personal relationship with the living God.

Bernard of Clairvaux was a Benedictine monk born in 1090 AD. All those years ago he wrote a short little book called *On Loving God* where he describes the different degrees of love people go through as they grow in spiritual maturity. The first degree is that a man loves himself for his own sake. This kind of love is completely selfish and there is no thought of who God is or what he has to offer.

The second degree comes when a man begins to see that there is something beyond himself. He begins to discern that God does exist and that maybe God can do something for him. So, he begins to love God, but it is still a selfish love. It is still a love that is centered around what do I get out of this relationship. If they thought they wouldn’t get anything out of their relationship with God, they would abandon their love for him in a heartbeat.

That’s exactly what Satan tried to get Job to do. When Job lost his livelihood, his family, and then finally his health, even his friends were telling him to curse God and die. Satan was sure that Job would abandon his love for God when he lost everything he had been blessed with. But Job’s faith in God was of a different kind of love. His love was of the next of Bernard’s degrees.

The third degree is to love God simply because he is God. To love God for who he is, not for what he gives to us or what he does for us. We should love God because only God deserves our love and honor and adoration and worship. That’s what God wants from us. He wants us to choose to love him. He wants us to choose to have a relationship with him.

Before sin came into the world, the Bible tells us that God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He had a relationship with them, he spoke with them, they saw him face to face. But after sin entered the world that wasn’t possible anymore. Sin ripped apart the relationship between mankind and God. Ever since that time, God has been working to restore and redeem his creation. God has been working to redeem mankind since sin entered the world.

He wants to redeem us so that we can have that relationship with him again. That’s what he built us for. We were created for relationship with God. If you have ever struggled to find meaning in your life, start by working on having a relationship with your creator.

Today’s culture is often put off by the laws and regulations in the Bible. How dare someone else tell me how I ought to live my life? It’s almost as if he thinks he’s God or something. Again, people who think that way are missing the point. God give us those laws and regulations because he knows what is best for us. He knows what we need to do to live the kind of lives he designed us for.

But ultimately God doesn’t want us to follow a list of commands and regulations if he doesn’t first have our hearts. Listen to what God has to say about some of the things the Israelites were doing.

**Amos 5:21–23 ESV — 21** “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. **22** Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. **23** Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

**Isaiah 1:11–18 ESV — 11** “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. **12** “When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? **13** Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations— I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. **14** Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. **15** When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. **16** Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, **17** learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause. **18** “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

Here’s the thing: all those feasts, all those assemblies, all those offerings, everything the Israelites were doing were things God had commanded them to do in the law of Moses. So you might wonder why God is so upset when they are following all the rules, they are doing what he asked. It is because they were going through the motions, they were checking off all the items on the list, but their hearts were far from God.

In the case of the Israelites they were worshiping other gods. They would worship Baal and Asherah throughout the week because they thought they would help their crops, and then they would come to the Temple and worship the one true God.

They were trying to cover all their bases. They wanted the benefits they thought both the true God and these other false gods could offer them without any of the devotion or love that God desired of them. They were going through the motions of honoring and worshiping God, but they didn’t truly love him.

God doesn’t want us to go through the motions of worshiping him if our hearts are not in it. He doesn’t want us to act like we love and honor him if we really don’t. As God told Samuel when he chose David to be the next king, God doesn’t look at our outward appearance, he looks at our hearts. We might impress people with our outward appearance of devotion, but if our hearts are not in it then God will certainly not be impressed.

**Psalm 51:16–17 ESV — 16** For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. **17** The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Francis Chan tells the story of how he grew up in the church in his book *Crazy Love*. “I grew up believing in God without having a clue what He is like. I called myself a Christian, was pretty involved in church, and tried to stay away from all of the things that “good Christians” avoid—drinking, drugs, sex, swearing. Christianity was simple: fight your desires in order to please God. Whenever I failed (which was often), I’d walk around feeling guilty and distant from God. …My view of God was narrow and small.”

He talks about how his ideas and feelings about God in his first years as a Christian were mostly of fear because that’s the way his relationship with his earthly father functioned. It was the same for the Israelites. The Israelites relationship with God was supposed to be built on love. The laws God gave to the Israelites were meant to bring them close to him. But it ended up looking a lot more like a relationship built on fear.

The Israelites acted like they had to appease God by following his rules to avoid his wrath. Lots of people still treat God like that today. That’s not what the Gospel is all about. That’s one of the major differences between all the other religions of the world and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All the other religions of the world are exactly that kind of works-based religion. They all tell people they have to earn their way, they have to be good enough.

I saw a post online the other day that summed it up pretty well.

Religion says: I messed up. My dad’s gonna kill me. – Anybody grow up with a dad like that? That’s how a lot of people think about God. The Gospel is different.

The Gospel says: I messed up. I need to go talk to my dad. – Instead of being fearful of our Father when we’re in trouble, this point of view looks at him as the one that we run to. He’s the first place we go when things are going wrong instead of the one we try to hide things from.

The Gospel of Jesus is all about the fact that none of us are good enough. None of us could ever earn our way on our own. Only one person in all of history was ever good enough to earn his way into heaven. He died on a cross so that we could put on his righteousness. He died in our place so that we could have a clean slate before God. Jesus died for us because he loves us, and he wants us to love him back.

**John 3:16–17 ESV — 16** “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

So many people hold God at arm’s length and try to work on checking off all the items on their list. Trying to do all the right things. Some people think they need to get their life together before they can come to God. That they need to fix all their own mistakes and become worthy of God before they come to him. They are missing the point.

God wants to have a close, intimate relationship with us. He wanted that so much that he gave us a way to be made righteous. He gave the life of his son Jesus so that we could be set free of our sin, so that we could spend eternity with him. Most of all so that we could have that intimate, personal relationship that he created us to have with him.