

The Curse of Legalism

One of the great battlegrounds in the early churches was over the error of legalism. In its earliest appearance this religious teaching focused on the observance of the law as a means of salvation. The term law was used primarily to refer to the Mosaic legislation given at Mount Sinai. It includes religious practices and moral codes and the civil order. The law itself was expanded to include traditions. So the concept is that a person by performing religious rituals, doing good works or obeying the various aspects of the law earns or merits his or her salvation or at least contributes to its continuance.

Paul was God's instrument in breaking the back of such a deadly teaching. To the Galatian Christians he wrote: *We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.* (Galatians 2:15-16) To the church in Rome he wrote: *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.* If one is to be saved by the law, he must keep it in all of its details, perfectly for all of life. Otherwise, he falls under the curse of the law. James 2:10 reads, *For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*

Since all men have sinned, in some respect, in thought, word, or deed, all stand under the curse of the law. And Paul testifies, *now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.* (Romans 3:19-20) Thus he writes, *For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.* (Galatians 3:10)

To combat a return to the Old Covenant especially as given to Moses and Israel at Sinai both the epistle to the Hebrews and the letters of Paul to the Colossians and

Galatia were given. To prevent any misunderstanding various aspects of the older covenants are spelled out. We are told not to return to the old order which functioned as preparation for the new order in Christ and as a shadow of Jesus person and work. To retreat to former is a type of denial to the sufficiency of Christ and his work on our behalf. Thus animal sacrifices, priestly orders and services, dress codes, food laws, circumcision, feast days and sabbath days have been fulfilled and replaced by the Lord Jesus and the New Covenant. Thus Paul writes: *Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.* (Colossians 2:16-17) One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. Romans 14:5-6

Here Christ Jesus enters the picture as the Savior of sinners, who took upon himself the curse of the law. Paul in Galatians 3:13 writes, *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”*—His death paid our penalty and by faith we lay hold of the grace of God in Christ. The whole action of salvation is the work of God and therefore the Bible says, *For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift*—(Ephesians 2:8)“By grace we are saved through faith in Jesus person and his work on our behalf.

Yet legalism continues to rear its head in the church. It adopts new forms but at the heart it is the same basic evil. Fundamental and evangelical Christians can often adopt a form of legalism. It can be expressed in many ways such as a rigid moralism, or separation from others over secondary matters or humanitarianism as a faith within itself. Often our churches become legalistic, competitive institutions. How you ask? *By teaching us that we are accepted because we are good performers.* What is often taught, if not in word, at least in actions, is that God initially accepts us by faith, but we must keep all the codes if we are to continue to deserve God' love and forgiveness.

Legalism is like a common cold. It can break out anywhere in any group, and it is contagious! Often legalism finds expression among us in rigid rules about

questions of behavior that are in the realm of liberty of choice. So we have a long list of “don’ts,” such as no dancing, card playing, drinking, wearing long hair, particular dress, movies, etc. Legalism is known more by its negatives than anything else. The legalist is always “against something” and often forgets what he is “for.”

Jesus had a lot to say about legalism and its dangers. *Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.* (Matthew 6:1)

Perhaps a look at a few of legalism’s characteristics will help us avoid this evil. Legalism can be practiced “for show.” Religious acts and the wearing of certain types of clothing or being against certain things others do can simply be a way of telling others how religious we are. Now the dangers Jesus say in all of this was the fostering of pride. By obeying all the rules, the legalist feels superior to other people. This is illustrated in Jesus story of the Pharisee and Publican who went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ (Luke 18:11)

Also the activity and stress on our “not doing certain things” can cover up a lot of inner problems and sinful attitudes that are never dealt with in honesty before God. Jesus exposed this in his remarks on the commandments you shall not commit adultery. *I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* (Matthew 5:28) And the Apostle John based on Jesus teaching wrote: *Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer.* (1 John 3:15)

Another earmark of legalism is its tendency to breed hypocrisy. To use Jesus’ phrase, “*we strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!*” Some become too busy evaluating dress, hair styles and banning actions that are a matter of personal discretion than to worry about racism, world hunger, war or even the development of positive spiritual attitudes in Christian relationships.

Another characteristic is that legalism lends itself to “ego trips” and power games among Christians. In this we become too introspective and often grow callous to the needs of other people. From such Christ would have us turn away.

Legalism also lowers our view of God and our concept of sin. Legalists can easily fool us because they are so dedicated. But the tragedy is that they miss the whole point of the Gospel.

We can't meet God's approval by following a rulebook. Also, we can't ever arrive to perfection in the Christian life. God is holy and perfect, and *he* is our goal. To reach such a goal we must depend on God and his powerful grace all of our lives. God's love is freely given in Jesus Christ and to experience such a love is the transforming power of the Christian life.