

RELIGIOUS LEGALISM

Religious legalism essentially replaces the grace of God with the pride of man. Legalists, whether or not they realize or admit it, seek God's favor and reward for adherence to some self-created, arbitrary system of rules and/or rituals. Beyond this, they concern themselves with impressing others with their "godliness." This causes them to focus on outward appearance and acts rather than inward heart condition. The legalist considers himself higher than he ought, and employs the measure of himself to judge others. Yet, he fails to realize this and adamantly denies it. Further, he so busies himself enforcing his self-created system of righteousness on others that he is blinded to his own sinfulness and shortcomings. When others choose to pursue righteousness in the freedom Christ provides, he accuses them of going the "way of the world," living without rules to indulge themselves. Of course, the only rules being ignored - eliciting his judgmentalism - is the legalist's rule set. He is blinded to the fact that, in Christ, men are freed from man-made rules to follow God's rules. Jesus reserved His harshest criticisms for the purveyors of legalistic "religion" (Mt 23; Lk 11).

The measure of someone's standing before God has everything to do with his heart and nothing to do with legalistic adherence. Legalists may *seem* to be seeking after the righteous requirements of God, but they are actually pursuing the satisfaction of meeting their own requirements of themselves. In failing to see their sinfulness from God's view, they are unaware of their need of a Savior. Instead, their mitigated view of their shortcomings allows them to seek exoneration in the keeping of rules and rituals, all the while denying they are doing so. They judge themselves as good by their own standard of obedience. But actually, they do not and cannot obey even their own impositions perfectly. They cover this failure with their own self-created allowances, exemptions and justifications.

Legalism axiomatically leads others away from proper focus on God's Word and *His* requirements and standards. It corrupts these others and spreads that corruption, greatly displeasing God (thus, Jesus' harsh rebuke of the Pharisees and Scribes). It instills a false sense of security by replacing God's requirements with a seemingly easier set of their own making; yet, a naturally less profound and entirely unavailing set. At the same time, it drives others away from God and Christianity as they witness hypocrisy among the rules-makers. Moreover, folks find emptiness in the pursuit of rules and rituals - it lacks the vibrant excitement and exhilarating joy God intends in Holy Spirit-led, intimate relationship with His true children. Finally, legalists strip themselves of the power to properly evangelize because they possess ineffective tools. Therefore, legalistic "religions" invariably excuse their lack of evangelism by claiming to witness by their lifestyle. While they may nonetheless involve themselves in various

outreach efforts of a practical nature - even beyond mere feel-goodism - those efforts do not and cannot include any effective presentation of the gospel (if any at all).

Another facet of some legalistic thinking is that self-denial is virtuous, accruing righteous reward. Some view convenience and comfort as de facto sin, eschewing even the simplest, most widely-accepted modern inventions, methods and utilitarian means. They deliberately choose inconvenient or difficult ways, considering them righteously superior to ease and convenience. They criticize, and some even condemn those who avail themselves of modern advancements. In the extreme, some engage in self-flagellation (self-inflicted injury, pain and suffering - even being literally nailed to a cross) believing that God is pleased with such “sacrifice.” Apparently, they are unaware of Ps 51:16; Pr 15:8; Isa 1:11; Jer 6:20; Hos 8:13; 9:4; Rom 12:1 and others.

Among legalists of the “plain communities,” there is an overt emphasis on “separation from the world.” This is indeed a biblical concept (Jam 1:27; 2Co 6:14, etc.) but it is misunderstood and misapplied. God's call to Christian separation from the world has to do with character - obedience to/relationship with Him. The plain communities find fulfillment of this exhortation to separateness in outward appearance and cultural lifestyle. They so overwhelmingly focus upon - and harshly enforce among themselves - this separation rooted in outward doings and appearance that there is no room for the Holy Spirit in their lives. Often, there is individual unspoken and repressed misery, suffering and desire to break free of the replacement yoke which Gal 5:1 forbids. As with other examples of legalism, it necessarily devolves to a mere cult-like drudgery.

In legalistic circles, there is an absence of proper emphasis on sound biblical doctrine. Such an emphasis risks exposing the error of their legalism. Thus, many legalistic enterprises discourage or outright forbid personal home bible study (some allow individual study but ban groups; some discourage or ban both). Many also forbid congregants to attend other fellowships where they may discover the error of the legalism they've been yoked to. A signature component of some legalistic fellowships is that congregants do not bring a bible to their fellowship meetings. And while the bible may be employed and taught, proper exposition of sound, complete doctrine is lacking. In many cases, the teaching out of God's Word does not match the intended meaning. Ironically, many legalists “know” the scriptures but yet engage in their “religion” and lifestyle rooted instead in their replacement source of righteousness.

Often, legalists justify their extra-biblical rules and rituals by appealing to “traditions” (a concept Jesus vehemently rejected - Mt 15; Mk 7), or unabashed reliance on the personal preferences of a charismatic or professional leader, or the consensus of the fellowship board. Still, many legalists do make great neighbors and lead exemplary lives from a practical view. They simply need to be born again and rid themselves of the shackles with which they have bound themselves - or allowed others to bind them.

Finally, in abject irrationality and downright silliness, many of the actual rules and rituals of legalistic enterprises are utterly laughable. A cursory examination of the Pharisees' Sabbath rules alone - and then their self-invented exceptions and exemptions - leaves our heads spinning. (Challenge yourself to research why it was legal to retrieve water from a well on the Sabbath using a woman's girdle but not a rope!) Modern legalists cannot avoid the same nonsense - some of their rules are likewise fit for a publication's comic section.

Gal 5:1-18

¹It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

*IF one is saved, he has been set free by Christ and is commanded to stand firm in the freedom Christ died to provide. Man is NOT to invent or arrange for a *replacement* yoke out of fear or feelings of guilt in properly exercising this freedom paid for with the precious shed blood of the perfect Son of God. Doing so enslaves such folks to their invention and prevents them from accomplishing the plan God has for them. Enslavement to their own invented edicts prevents them from experiencing the Holy Spirit and turns them away from focusing on God. Evangelism is precluded because the lost cannot be introduced to Christ while calling them to obey a man-made set of rules. Finally, improper judgmentalism is impossible to avoid when obedience to man-made rules is the measure of righteousness - and while legalists will claim and perhaps honestly intend that the rules are not heavenly-admittance requirements, it is impossible to separate them from such. When membership in a local church fellowship hinges upon obedience to the invention of some man or group of men, the unity which Christians are called to is impossible, and improper judging becomes mandatory. It is impossible to take hold of Christ while maintaining a death-grip hold on a replacement measure of righteousness - and all the while adamantly denying that one is doing so.*

²Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. ⁴You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

This explains it clearly for anyone who has ears to hear. It is an either/or proposition: either your hope is in Christ or it is in one's choice of legalistic enslavement. One will either be obligated and obedient to Christ or obligated and obedient to some rules set. It is impossible to do both simultaneously. When one chooses to seek justification through obedience to legalism, he scorns the justification Christ freely offers and has provided as a finished event. Alienation and falling away from Christ is inevitable. Anyone who pursues obedience to any "religion" of man has no proper understanding of and appreciation for the righteousness of Christ and the magnitude of His sacrifice!

⁵But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope.

⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

One is either operating by faith in a sureness of hope in the righteousness of Christ imputed to himself without merit, or he places himself on a non-stop treadmill working himself to doom as he pursues a futile attempt to find righteousness on his own.

⁷You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? ⁸That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. ⁹"A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." ¹⁰I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be. ¹¹Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. ¹²As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

Paul expresses frustration that folks who once sincerely and willingly received the truth and committed themselves to obey it would then allow themselves to be persuaded to abandon that and instead become beholden to some man-made edicts. He points out that such error cannot come from the Lord who called them. And he solemnly indicates that once such error takes hold in a few, it will surely infect the many. There is no cause or explanation for such confusion except that there are those who agitate for it.

¹³You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. ¹⁴The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. ¹⁶So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

Paul puts to rest the notion that the freedom Christ provides is to be feared and given a bad reputation, so that its proponents and adherents should fall under criticism and even condemnation of men. Clearly, freedom in Christ comes with responsibility and duty. It is not a license to indulge the flesh. It is a call to service for Christ. And yet, be forewarned: in this life, the saved possess two competing natures constantly in conflict. Feeding the Spirit nature and starving the sinful nature is the formula for success. Note, especially, the point regarding the biting and devouring of one another. This is what leads to church split after church split. Some group places themselves in charge of righteousness and demands that all others obey them. It is beyond understanding that this phenomenon continues unabated while those involved blind themselves to it!

Rom 14

¹Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. ²One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. ⁴Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. ⁵One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" ¹²So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

First, it is of paramount importance to note and understand that this passage is speaking of and comparing 2 brothers; that is 2 saved believers. And furthermore, it explicitly points out that the brother who requires the rules in order to comport himself in righteousness is the weaker brother. That is, when 2 brothers are both pleasing God as they live out their salvation, the one who can do so without an extra-biblical rulebook is the stronger Christian. This does not mean rules are wrong or bad (Paul tells Timothy in 1Ti 1:8 that we know the law is good if one uses it properly), but just as a child requires rules and supervision but eventually matures and is able to properly handle his freedom and manage his responsibilities without rulebook guidance, the young Christian must mature and be able to follow Christ without the whip of a rules set. The critical point being delivered here is that each brother is a servant of the Lord and stands at *HIS* judgment, not the whims of some rule-making group of men. Brothers are not to judge brothers according to some arbitrary rule set conjured of mere men. Each stands or falls before the Lord alone. It is impossible to attain to and maintain the unity God calls us to if fellowship hinges upon obedience to the arbitrary impositions of men. And it is impossible to avoid the improper judgment forbidden here if man-made rules replace or are added to the standard which God has established and revealed. As indicated, one's conscience is to be his guide. If something hinders one's relationship with God or presents a problematic temptation, then he is right to either abstain from or to participate in whatever conviction he settles upon - assuming both do not violate the Master Rulebook. But no one, no group, no fellowship, no religion has the right or authority to establish rules for others over disputable matters. Disputable matters are simply those things which allow multiple options which do not violate Scripture. Each one is free to choose his desired option.

¹³Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. ¹⁴As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. ¹⁵If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. ¹⁶Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

And so, Paul repeats in emphasis that we should not be judging one another in matters of freedom. He then introduces the notion of avoiding actions which may cause a brother to stumble. That is, while we are free to exercise our freedoms and choices, we must consider their effect on the weaker brother. Unspoken, however, is that this necessarily entails practical limits. There are times when the weaker brother needs to be exhorted, in gentleness and love, to “grow up.” For that reason, Paul instructs us not to allow what we consider good to be spoken of as evil. But this also applies when we do acquiesce to the desire of the weaker brother. Though we accommodate his weakness, we must remain firm in maintaining that our preferred choice is not evil. The weaker brother must learn that his adherence to a stricter self-imposed code does not signify some extra or better measure of righteousness or godly obedience.

¹⁹Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall. ²²So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Paul closes this section by explaining the overarching point of it all; that we ought to be pursuing all means to establish and maintain peace among the brethren, and to be diligent in seeking the proper edification of all. Arguing about issues of freedom distracts or disables us from doing what God has carved out for us to do. In the end, each of us must be faithful to our conscience when it is aligned with God.

The link below is to a portion of a study on “God's Plan of Salvation.” It deals with the issue of unity; God's exhortation and admonition to believers to seek and covet unity - not only for their own benefit, but in order to glorify and magnify God to others. As already repeated, godly unity is impossible if rule-making and rule-adherence is substituted for or added to God's Word. Even with the best of intentions to resist and

prevent the rules from becoming a destructive distraction, all such efforts must inevitably undo the pursuit or maintenance of unity in the Body of Christ.

https://www.dropbox.com/s/ke9zs468s1et6g2/pos13a-christian_unity-one_bread-one_body.pdf?dl=0

It would be best to examine the presentation above (verse texts are included). However, here are the verse references covered in that review of Christian unity:

(The presented order is from the link above, where they are strategically categorized.)

1Co 10:17; Jn 6:33-35a; Jn 6:48-51; 1Co 12:12-20; Rom 12:4-5; Eph 4:3-6, 16, 25; Col 3:15; 1Co 1:10; 12:25-27; Mk 9:50; Phl 2:1-2; Eph 4:13; 2Co 13:11; Col 2:2a; Act 4:32; Rom 15:5-7; Rom 14:13; 1Co 3:8a; 1Th 5:13b; 1Pe 3:8; Ps 133:1; Jn 17:20-23

Another extremely salient component of the issue of this writing is profoundly delivered in the book of Hebrews. The specific purpose, the overt theme of that writing is the preeminence of Jesus over all religious rules, rituals, sacrifices, practices, traditions, oaths, angels, prophets, priests, the Sabbath rest, the Old Covenant ... everything previously seen as authoritatively necessary to or instruments of righteousness or a path to God. While the folks specifically addressed there are the Jews of the New Testament Church, its message pertains to and is extremely effective with *any* legalistic religious group. The principles of the Letter to the Hebrews are universal.

Setting aside the Pharisaical twistings and additions to the Law, we can have great sympathy for the originally-intended audience since they were following what had been handed down through Moses and the Prophets, commanded by God Himself. In God's sovereign wisdom, He had incrementally introduced shadows of what was to come and had commanded obedience to them until such time as the Messiah would fulfill and replace these symbols and types with the realities which find completion in Himself and His finished work (Gal 4:4-7). These Jewish believers needed to be gently and lovingly brought to the understanding that their expectations and hopes had been fulfilled in Jesus and it was now time to set aside the former mere representations. They could be excused for their reluctance and confusion from a practical view. As in all spiritual enlightenment for all of us, the Holy Spirit was the required clarifying agent.

And the Holy Spirit is the only source of the power required to reach those who are the modern targets of the Hebrews writing. Modern folks fall under much greater guilt and criticism for their resistance since the legalism they practice is not at all excusable. It is not of God; it is entirely man-made. The truth is available to them; historically evidenced, along with overwhelming, irrefutable testimony and the specific teachings of scripture. Yet, when presented with these, they argue for their chosen invented replacements. When once the Holy Spirit turns on the spiritual light in their minds and hearts, they will see the clear, inarguable preeminence of Christ over their unavailing,

utterly useless rules and practices to which they shackle themselves and in which they place their hope - while passionately denying they do so.

Here is a link to a survey of the book of Hebrews which will be helpful in this regard:
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/xoymf3yejixk8ec/hebrews.pdf?dl=0>

Chapters 1 and 2 present Jesus as superior to the prophets and angels. Chapter 3 shows His superiority over Moses; chapter 4 over Joshua and the land of rest into which he led the people of God. None of these were small or easy obstacles for the writer to persuade these Jews to overcome. All were tightly held in great reverence and respect. But the writer is attempting to introduce them to Christ and to convince them of His monumental superiority to all these things they understandably held dear.

Next comes the really tough task - the challenge which faces those who evangelize modern legalists, or for that matter, the modern merely religious. From the end of chapter 4 through the beginning of chapter 8, the writer dares to present Jesus as superior to and a replacement for their entire religious and sacrificial systems, along with doing away with the religious priesthood of men, including their high priest. This is a very delicate and dangerous undertaking in light of the fact that this encompassed the entire culture and daily doings of these Jews. Similarly, legalists fearfully cling to their familiar and comfortable replacements of truth when they have grown up with them or have otherwise convinced themselves (or been convinced by others) to accept them. For such folks, letting go of the only "religion" they know is a debilitating trauma.

In chapters 8 and 9, a logical, persuasive case is presented explaining the need for and superiority of the New Covenant over the Old, the ministry of Jesus over that of the Levitical priesthood, the heavenly tabernacle over the earthly one, the shed blood of Christ as far superior to the blood of animals, the perfect efficacy of Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice over the unavailing, repeated, merely ritualistic sacrifices, and Christ Himself as our perfect Mediator over the ineffective mediation of human priests. Also explained is the reason for the failure of the Old Covenant; the same reason which logically leads to the similar failure of legalistic religion.

Following are verses which expose various particular facets of the errors of legalism:

Col 2:20-23

²⁰Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ²¹"Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? ²²These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. ²³Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Lots of great points. But note the final clincher: After all is said and done, rules lack any value to restrain sin, much less any power to overcome it or pay its debt!

2Co 3:17

¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Among plain communities, freedom is feared. Overwhelming guilt precludes them from exercising it. In false modesty, they claim they cannot trust themselves. They point to those in sin as proof that freedom is a catalyst to wanton debauchery - ignoring those who live righteously in the freedom Christ has provided. When a member breaks loose from their ranks, they judge them as going the way of the world - without any rules.

Col 2:8

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

This is precisely what happens to those stuck in legalism.

Gal 4:4-7

⁴But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. ⁶Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

We have been redeemed from the impossible task of perfectly keeping the Law. In the freedom granted us once we are born again, we become the very sons and heirs of God Himself, granted the right - through the Holy Spirit - to call out to Him as "Daddy!" We are no longer slaves to the Law or any replacement man-made legalistic system. We are free in Christ to obey God instead - and to approach Him for forgiveness when we fall short. Again, the legalist shouts, "They've gone the way of the world! They have no rules!" The truth is, we have the Master Rulebook. We know the futility of following, or *attempting* to follow, *their* rules! We have the Master Forgiver. They're forced to invent some way to justify or weasel out of their shortcomings. Worse, they're left to worry about whether they've been good enough to enter Heaven. So, in futility (without realizing it), they search for some religious work to pay for their failings.

Eph 2:8-9

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.

Legalists deflect criticism that they rely on rule observance for acceptance by God. They claim that they agree that salvation is by faith. Nevertheless, we must judge their actions, not their words. In addition to their obvious reliance on rule-adherence to attain salvation, they require human effort to prevent its loss.

Rom 3:27-28

²⁷Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. ²⁸For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

The only boasting we can make is in Jesus; in the work of salvation He consummated on the Cross - and in God's provision of the free gift of faith. All else is excluded.

Gal 2:15-16

¹⁵"We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' ¹⁶know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

Attempting to find justification in keeping the whole of God's law is futile; whenever we would decide to do so, we will have already failed. Substituting man's law is foolish and likewise impossible - not to mention a blasphemy of the Cross.

Gal 2:21

²¹I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

A compelling truth. Why would Christ have borne the cross if we could keep the law?

Gal 3:10-14

¹⁰All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."

¹¹Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." ¹²The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." ¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." ¹⁴He

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.

This ought to be self-evident. Why cast our eternal lot with a futile hope to keep the law when we have been freely gifted a guaranteed hope in Christ?

Rom 11:5-6

⁵So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. ⁶And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

Legalism indicts itself by extinguishing the grace of God, substituting the works of man.

Rom 10:1-4

¹Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. ²For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. ³Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

⁴Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Indeed, many legalists (not all) possess a zealous desire for God but are, in one way or another, misguided in pursuit of righteousness. Failing to recognize or understand God's provision, they compel themselves to provide their own. Isa 64:6 addresses this.