

**Legalism**  
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There is an individual amongst us this morning who has brought me much concern. If he's not stopped, he could ruin the church. He's running around telling people that we have an obligation to follow the commandments as they're revealed in the Bible. Doesn't he know that we're free from the law and now living under grace? His rules and expectations have created a burden for this church, which are too difficult for any of us to bear. I prefer to follow the spirit of the law, as the Bible says. His tactics are sheer legalism if you ask me! I rarely mention personal names from the pulpit, but I feel I need to expose this legalistic man before further damage is done.

His name is Jesus Christ.

I hope you will excuse my sarcasm, but this line of reasoning is not uncommon to many in today's church. For the next two weeks, I'd like to discuss with you the much-misunderstood and greatly abused topic of legalism as we continue our series entitled "Church and Home Unity."

Legalism is a deadly sin that can destroy unity. Furthermore, it's an error that can keep people from experiencing the joy of the Christian life by holding them under unnecessary bondage. Moreover, it sends many apparently devout followers of God straight to the pits of hell.

Regarding legalism, Pastor Ray Stedman once said, "I know of no affliction in Christendom which is more widespread and more devastating in its destructiveness than this" (Sermon: "Legalism"). Arthur Wallace commented, "Legalism is Satan's most effective means of infiltrating and undermining the work and witness of the church" (*The Radical Christian*, 155).

But as I fictitiously stated in the introduction, much of the church throws this term around without any biblical understanding whatsoever of its reality. I've witnessed it right here amongst some in this flock. Sadly, based on some current definitions of legalism, Jesus Christ is the biggest legalist who ever walked the planet!

Since such a suggestion is nothing but blasphemous, we must initially consider what is expected in the life of a believer but often mistaken for legalism in the life of the church.

**Legalism: What it is not**

*1. Legalism is not obedience to Christ's commandments.*

Jesus Christ has become our new lawgiver. He expects us to follow Him in wholehearted obedience. In Lk 6:46 He said, "Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" **Understanding our freedom in Christ** (Jn 8:32, 36) **is contingent upon understanding our slavery to Christ.** Paul, James, Jude, Peter, and John all gratefully acknowledge themselves as "bondservants" of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10; Phil 2:7; Tit 1:1; Jas 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1:1, Rev 1:1). He is our Lord. He is our Master. As Christians we are commanded to do as He says. We have been set free to do as He says. Anything less robs our joy and fails to display our love for the Savior. Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (Jn 14:15).

You wouldn't believe the number of people who have sought to abide by these expectations of Jesus Christ only to be called legalists by other people who profess to be His children. Instead of rightly encouraging these individuals in their Christian commitment, these obedient saints are discouraged in their pursuit of doing what God desires by being wrongly criticized as legalists.

Our Lord said, "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:44). He remarked, "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Tit 2:11-12). In John we read, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (Jn 3:36). We are called to "discipline (ourselves) for the purpose of godliness" (1 Tim 4:7).

When someone, whether he identifies himself as Christian or not, takes what God commands His children and not only shuns it but condemns it as the sin of legalism, he is clearly performing the work of the adversary. Simply put, he functions as a mouthpiece for Satan.

Paul said, "If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing" (1 Tim 6:3-4a). In 2 Tim 3:5 he said these wolves in sheep's clothing "(hold) to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these." The last thing God wants is people coming into His church and telling His flock that it is legalistic to obey His Word.

Because of this massive deception within the church of Jesus Christ, many people are more afraid of being deemed "legalistic" than they fear displeasing the Lord through unholy conduct. Beloved, if we are filled with the Holy Spirit, our greatest goal should be (Col 1:10) to "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God," desiring daily to be conformed further into the image of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:29).

We should want to use the freedom that has been purchased for us by Christ (1 Cor 7:22-23) to escape the shackles of sin that previously held us in bondage for so long. How can we as God's holy children desire to continue in the filth of sin, the same sin that placed our Savior on the cross, the same sin that brings about the wrath of God and would have sent us to hell? And then proudly call it a display of "grace" or "Christian liberty" or "New Covenant living" and oppose others who disagree by calling them legalistic?

The warped mentality is as old as the Scriptures. Rom 6:1-2 says, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" Paul continues, "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?" (Rom.6:15-16).

**Regardless of what many think, we are not legalists when we obey Jesus Christ. On the contrary, we are Christians.**

## 2. *Legalism is not adopting strong personal convictions*

The Bible is clear as to what God expects from His children. For example, we know that it is wrong to steal (Eph 4:28), fornicate (Heb 13:11), and lie (Pr 6:17); and it is right to minister (1 Cor 12:7), evangelize (2 Tim 4:5), and pray (Rom. 12:12). We should all share and agree upon these general convictions.

However, God leads His children at times in different ways. We are all individually guided by the Holy Spirit, our own conscience, and general principles in the Word of God. This in turn develops personal convictions within our own heart. These convictions, which are not based on direct commandments from the Bible, are nevertheless based on biblical principles and are both acceptable and expected for the Christian to hold.

For example, many of the commandments for spiritual purity are written in a very general fashion. Such an approach by the Holy Spirit may be frustrating to those of us who want a list of "do's and don't's, a Christian book of Leviticus, if you will); but it is actually a very wise tactic in the counsel of God. You see, the avoidance of many specific rules not only enables the Scriptures to transcend time and culture, it also forces us to depend on the Spirit's inner guidance for direction and not approach our relationship with God as if it were a spiritual checklist to be completed. Though "check-list religion" is very appealing to our flesh, God our Father wants us forever seeking His guidance and growing in a relationship that is not mechanical or stoic or distant but one that is intimate and relational and vibrant.

Let's take the popular commandment from Phil 4:8: "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things."

For me, this verse has always served as a wonderful grid to sift my actions as to whether they should be pursued or rejected. It's helped me take all those gray areas of life not mentioned in the Scriptures and personally determine which ones I believe will further glorify God in my own individual walk with Him.

For instance, the verse teaches we are to pursue the things that are pure. Let's single that down specifically to sexual purity. Obviously, the sexual sins of adultery, homosexuality, fornication, and bestiality are impure. The Scriptures clearly identify those impure sins by name. But what about visiting a strip-club or attending an X-rated movie? Would that be impure? I believe we would all say "yes" even though neither of them are mentioned specifically in our Bibles. What about an R-rated movie? What about a PG-rated movie with some occasional nudity? Is that impure? What about going to a nudist beach? What about wearing a skimpy bathing suit at the beach? What about going to the beach in general? What about even driving down Ocean Avenue during the peak summer season knowing well in advance what you're bound to see? Would any of these be impure activities in your estimation? How did you come to that conclusion? What about having another adult of the opposite sex alone with you in your home when your spouse is not present? Is that impure? What about your conversations with the opposite sex? When do they get a little too personal or a little too friendly? When has the line of purity been crossed? How far should singles go in their physical contact with their boyfriends and girlfriends? What magazines should you read and what television shows should you watch? Is it impure to even own a television? What about the use of the Internet? Is there any impurity there? Where do you personally draw the line? Where does your family draw the line?

Some convictions are established as our conscience applies general biblical admonitions. Some convictions are established as a safeguard to prevent sinning. In Rom 13:14 we read, "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." **All of us should be well aware of our spiritual weaknesses. We should do whatever it takes to eliminate any stumbling blocks that may cause us to fall in these vulnerable areas.** We are to aggressively take the necessary actions to eradicate even the possibility of sin. These become strong convictions.

Jesus Himself made this principle clear when He said, "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Mt 5:29), and "If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell" (Mt 5:30). Though abused by Christians throughout history, Jesus is not calling for a literal application but rather calling His children with extreme seriousness to do whatever it takes to avoid personal sin.

That's why I personally know of families who have removed their television. I know of adults who will never touch alcohol again. I know of singles that promise to abstain from any physical contact until their wedding day. I recently conducted a Christian wedding where the couple kissed for the very first time at the conclusion of the ceremony. Are these people weird? Are these people wrong? Are these people legalistic if they keep their convictions to themselves?

Jas 4:17 teaches, "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin." **We must not violate our conscience, and therefore we must not critique people with strong convictions.** We must not quench the work of the Spirit in their life. We may not share their convictions, but we must encourage them as they encourage us in their pursuit to glorify God. We must do whatever it takes to prevent our Christian freedom in some of these areas from being the stumbling block they are trying to remove. **The Scriptures teach we must always limit our own freedom in Christ if it means upholding another in their conviction** (Rom 14-15).

3. *Legalism is not establishing guidelines for church conduct.*

The best example I can think of in this area would be the church in Corinth. The place adopted an incorrect view of the charismatic gifts, which eventually led to more of a circus environment than a church service.

In his first letter to the church, Paul needed to step in and institute some guidelines. He needed to establish order: 1 Cor 14:26 says, “What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.” 1 Cor 14:31-33 says, “For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.” 1 Cor 14:40 says, “But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.”

He needed to establish some specific protocol for tongue speaking: “If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God” (1 Cor 14:27-28).

**Order reflects the character of God.** Order preserves our witness to the lost. 1 Cor 14:23-25 says, “Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.”

Unfortunately, if Paul had said these things to the church today, especially some in some charismatic circles, he would no doubt be labeled a legalist. **God expects us to conduct sensible, self-controlled, and intelligent worship** that is edifying to all without restraining God-wrought emotion as the Spirit of God brings to our heart the Word of God.

Therefore, such convictions cause us to say, “You can’t dance around the pews during a worship service because you will be drawing all the attention to yourself.” Such convictions cause us to say, “We will not serve alcohol at our church fellowships because it will cause some within this church to stumble.” **Every church needs to establish general guidelines based on biblical principles in love to honor a God of order** and bring edification and encouragement to the people of His flock during worship. These guidelines need not be legalistic.

So it is not legalistic to pursue obedience to God’s Word. It is not legalistic to pursue personal convictions providing we keep them to ourselves. And it’s not legalistic to establish guidelines for church conduct. But what is the sin of legalism? With the time that remains I’d like to answer that question.

**Legalism: What it is**

**Legalism is any attempt to earn your salvation by contributing your works to the work accomplished by Jesus on the cross.** In others words, it’s a “Christ-plus” message.

The best example in Scripture is found in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. After a successful missionary endeavor (Ac 14:27), a certain sect commonly called the Judaizers infiltrated the region of Galatia and began to demand the new Christian converts to abide by the law of Moses in addition to the work of Christ to achieve salvation. Their motto is recorded in Ac 15:1: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Paul was shocked! He says, “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ” (Gal 1:6-7). Such teaching flew in the face of the true Gospel. Therefore, Paul wrote this blessed epistle to once again present the true Gospel and correct their error.

As for the true Gospel, it is one of grace, resting solely in the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross to forgive our sins and justify us in the sight of God. Gal 2:16: "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." Gal 2:21: "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

You see, **the moment you add anything to the work of Christ, you have fallen from grace.** Galatians 5:4, "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace."

Paul makes it clear that we must either rest entirely on grace or reject Christ and attempt to fulfill the law in completion by ourselves. Gal 3:10: "For as many as are of the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.'" Gal 5:3: "And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole law."

Combining works and grace to achieve salvation is unacceptable legalism with devastating results. Gal 1:8-9: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!"

Therefore legalism is attempting to add our works to the work of Christ to merit our salvation. Do you believe that you are saved based upon grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? Or are you guilty of legalism like the Pharisees (Lk 18:9-14; Mt 23:13-28) who believe that salvation is based on your works, either in part or in whole? The legalist believes his forgiveness and acceptance with God is based on performance to a certain self-proclaimed standard. **The Christian, unlike those of every other religion, understands he cannot earn God's love and simply accepts it through the work of Christ.** That's why we call it "Amazing Grace."

### **Legalism: Its dangers**

For some of you, legalism may still appear to be somewhat innocent, but let me attempt to convince you how deadly it is both for yourself and your church.

#### *1. Legalism leads to or results from the general sin of pride.*

For example, take the prideful sin of self-worship. As fallen human beings, the debt we incurred against God was our desire to steal His glory. Those who commit the sin of legalism to get saved or sanctified are clearly falling into this trap. Instead of acknowledging that our salvation and sanctification are completely from God, we want to take some of the credit. We want to praise ourselves. We want to believe that we contributed in some way. We want to take the glory that rightly belongs to God and reflect it upon ourselves. As prideful, self-worshipping individuals, we have great difficulty in saying that our relationship with God is all of grace.

Thomas Schreiner concurs. "Legalism has its origin in self-worship. If people are justified through their obedience to the law, then they merit praise, honor and glory. Legalism, in other words, means the glory goes to people rather than God" (*The Law and Its Fulfillment*, 15).

But God said, "I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another" (Is 42:8a). God is offended when people seek to take credit for work that is rightly His and in doing so rob Him of His glory through self-worship.

Legalism also falls into the prideful sin of self-reliance. This is closely related to the sin of self-worship. Self-reliant people say, "What must I do to earn God's favor?" They fail to understand they can't do anything to earn His favor. They fail to understand their own sinfulness and the utter holiness of God. They fail to understand grace and the glorious fact that salvation is a gift. They think they can somehow

contribute. They think God in some way can use their help. They depend in part on their own strength, wisdom, righteousness and/or intuition.

C. J. Mahaney said, “The implications of legalism are staggering in their arrogance. Legalism claims that the death of Jesus on the cross was either unnecessary or insufficient. It essentially says to God, ‘Your plan didn’t work. The cross wasn’t enough and I need to add my good works to it to be saved’” (*The Cross-Centered Life*, 25).

Listen beloved, God wants us to lean wholly on Him, trust Him for His strength, and depend on His promises. Therefore **God is forever seeking to wean us from the sin of self-reliance**. However, I believe none of us are fully aware of how deceptive the sin of self-reliance really is. We fall into the trap of the Pharisees. And like them, we can even extol self-reliance because it can appear so pious.

John Piper brings out the danger of self-reliance’s deceptiveness by comparing it to the sin of alcoholism. Most of us would say alcoholism is a far deadlier sin than legalistic self-reliance, but listen: “Let us not be deceived by outward appearances. Satan ‘disguises himself as an angel of light’ (2 Cor 11:14). He keeps his deadliest diseases most sanitary. He clothes his captains in religious garments and houses his weapons in temples. Legalism is a more dangerous disease than alcoholism because it doesn’t look like one. Alcoholism makes men fail; legalism helps them succeed in the world. Alcoholism makes men depend on the bottle; legalism makes them self-sufficient, depending on no one. Alcoholism destroys moral resolve; legalism gives it strength. Alcoholics don’t feel welcome in the church; legalists love to hear their morality extolled in church” (*Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, 155).

Additionally, legalism leads to the sin of self-righteousness. Since the legalist believes God’s favor is based upon his self-determined standards, it’s only natural that he will judge and condemn and look down upon others who fail to live up to his extra-biblical regulations.

Legalism leads to the prideful sins of self-worship, self-reliance and self-righteousness, and let me give you a fourth one: Self-belief. The Gospel is simple! The apostle Paul said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Ac. 16:31). However, the moment we get legalistic and say, “That’s sounds too simple to be true” or “I need to add to God’s word,” we have fallen into the sin of self-belief. **Regardless of how much the world teaches us to believe in ourselves, God wants us to believe in Him with child-like faith and simply take Him at His Word.** God gave us the Scriptures as a sufficient revelation of Himself. They are not there for us to pick and choose what we want to believe or use them to reinforce our own preconceived ideas and preferences. When we judge the Scriptures rather than allowing the Scriptures to judge us, we fall into the sin of self-belief. We extol our wisdom over the wisdom of God.

## 2. *Legalism leads to a fear of losing God’s love.*

Permit me to give you a test. Possibly you have fallen into this trap. Let’s say you had a spiritually rich week. I mean, it was one of those weeks where everything clicked in your relationship with God. A mountaintop experience, if you will. Great devotionals every day. A few evangelistic opportunities. A week of faithful service at VBS. You really felt the nearness of God’s presence. And here you are on Sunday morning as the culmination of a great week, excited to meet corporately with God in worship.

Then let’s pretend next week doesn’t go as well. Your prayer time was pushed aside by other activities. You yell at your husband and discipline your children in anger. You exchange Wednesday’s prayer meeting for a movie that violated your conscience. And then comes Sunday morning. God appears so distant. You’re convicted about your sins. You even debate going to church but confess your sins and ask God to mercifully accept your worship.

Now here’s the big question: Which Sunday did God love you more? If you pick one over the other, you have you fallen into the trap of performance, which is the sin of legalism.

As I said earlier, legalists are self-focused. They are far more aware of their own sins and accomplishments than what Christ accomplished on the cross. God wants you to look to Him more than you look to yourself.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with self-examination, but as one wise pastor once told me a few years ago, “For every finger you point to yourself, point ten to Jesus Christ.”

We must understand that God’s love for us is based on the work of Christ. We didn’t earn it; we simply received it. It is undeserved on our part, but unconditional on His. For those in Christ Jesus, there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we can do to make God love us less.

### **Legalism: Its solution**

As we conclude, let’s look to the solution to overcome the sin of legalism. Actually, we’ve already covered the solution by simply reversing all the material we’ve covered thus far.

First of all, **you must look to Jesus**. You must rightly understand what God has done for you in Christ. You must understand that God’s favor and love are not conditioned on your obedience, but rather on the obedience of Jesus Christ in His sacrificial and substitutionary death on your behalf.

To overcome legalism, **the cross must always remain at the center of your lives**. The gospel must always be of “first importance” (1 Cor 15:3). We must live every day, not just the day we were saved, in the light of the Gospel. We must continually preach the Gospel to ourselves, because we have a tendency to drift into a performance-orientated mentality. Justification with God for Paul was not only a point-in-time event; it was also a present reality! He said, “For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (Gal 2:19-21).

The legalist loves to boast in his own self-righteousness. **The Christian loves to boast in the righteousness of Christ imputed to him through the cross**. “But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

Second, we must walk in the Spirit. Gal 5:16 says, “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.” When we walk in the Spirit, we will manifest the fruit of the Spirit.

Paul rebuked the legalistic Galatians by saying, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1). I hope you’re convinced. Legalism, a “Christ-plus” message, is a yoke of slavery. But with the help of God and desire for His glory, we may cast off the burden of legalism and turn to Jesus Christ who provides true freedom--freedom to avoid sin, freedom to obey Christ, and freedom to love others. “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal 5:13).