

The Deception of Doing

The Danger of Legalism and
Moralism for the People of God



Patrick J. Griffiths

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The Deception of Doing

The Danger of Legalism for the People of God

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An Introduction

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).

The cross captures the tension between a man-centered view and a God-centered view of the Christian life. The opponents against a grace-celebrating life are formidable. At times, the grip of legalism and a works-based relationship appear strong and relentless. Its infiltration is so subtle and its deception so pervasive that its influence exists long before it is felt or seen. Legalism’s success is seen in its acceptance as biblical Christianity. However, let us not be deceived. Legalism is a spiritual counterfeit. It is a joy robbing, soul starving, parasitical adversary that steals through stealth a Christ-exalting, Word-centered, Grace-based, Global-impacting expression.

The sinner is saved from sin. The saint must be saved from self. Human depravity loves self-sufficiency. It loves human autonomy, independence, the ability to go it alone, and the enormous gratification that comes from flying solo and accomplishing the task. Yet the Christian life is not one that can exist outside of the believing community or independent of Trinitarian intervention. It is in this selfish desire to merit divine blessing that we encounter legalism, the fiercest opponent to grace. The legalist is not the standard conforming Christian, but the self-deceived pseudo righteous individual who believes their “obedience” is meriting the favor of God. He is the great threat against the grace outpouring power of the cross. It is for this reason the saint must be saved from self. It is a difficult reflection to see, but when confronted by the mirror of the cross, we find ourselves to be legalistic in our relationship with God.

Confronting the legalist within is never pleasant, but not dealing with our own legalism is to remain a captive to the sin of self-reliance. For His people to enter into the full power of His cross they must shed themselves of self and come into the pervasive nature of His cross work. I would like to begin with a poem written in the 1860's by William B. Bradbury.

JESUS PAID IT ALL

Nothing either great or small,
Remains for me to do;
Jesus died and paid it all—
Yes, all the debt I owe.

Refrain:

Jesus paid it all,
All the debt I owe;
Jesus died, and paid it all—
Yes, all the debt I owe.

When He from His lofty throne
Stooped down to do and die,
Everything was fully done;
Yes, "Finished!" was His cry. [Refrain]

Weary, working, plodding one!
O, wherefore toil you so?
Cease your "doing": All was done
Yes, ages long ago. [Refrain]

Till to Jesus' work you cling,
Alone by simple faith,
"Doing" is a deadly thing,
All "doing" ends in death. [Refrain]

Cast your deadly "doing" down,
Down, all at Jesus' feet;
Stand in Him, in Him alone,
All glorious and complete. [Refrain]¹

As preachers and congregants, we are confused by grace. We find it indispensable for our salvation from sin's penalty, but find it woefully inadequate in our salvation from sin's power. Yet the grace that saves also sanctifies.

Let us examine this holy subject and see the glory of Christ, for Christ is Grace. There is always an ever present danger of seeking salvation from the sin of self-reliance for one's justification but continuing to live under the despotic regime of self-reliance for one's sanctification. We must persistently abandon our affection for lesser appetites and seek the soul satisfying riches of Christ.

It is my ongoing prayer that God's people would live in the fullness of who He is, what He has done, and who they are in Him.

¹ <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/j/e/p/jepaidal.htm>

2nd Introduction

Several years have passed since writing these initial thoughts on legalism inside the Evangelical Church. Subsequently a more common word occurs for legalism and that is the word moralism. In his article titled, "Why Moralism is not the gospel - and why so many Christians think it is,"¹ Albert Mohler defines moralism as, "**The belief that we can achieve righteousness by means of proper behavior.**" His article, however, places moralism in the area of justification and not sanctification. I find this limiting. I do not believe the church as a whole struggles with moralism in their justification. It does, however, struggle with moralism in its sanctification. Many believers are still under the impression that they can achieve and maintain righteousness by means of proper behavior. They have come to believe "if they put a nickel in, they'll get a dime back." Such thinking robs them of their cross-bought freedom and places them under the yoke of bondage. If there is a distinction between the two, let me suggest the following. Legalism operates in the area of justification, whereas moralism operates in the area of sanctification. Both deal with works righteousness. Both believe human activity causes divine obligation.

Moralism inside of Christianity, "is the practice of keeping various moral laws so as to please God and obtain and/or maintain one's salvation. Moralism is similar to legalism where keeping the Old Testament commandments is advocated in order to achieve and/or maintain salvation."² The church simply replaces the Old Testament commandments with the New Testament imperatives as the vehicle through which one's standing is secured and maintained. Such thinking is unfortunate. The desire of this short booklet is to guard the Christian against the deception

of moralism/legalism and to enable them to stand fast in the grace of God.

In the following pages, when one read legalism they can just as easily replace it with moralism. So enjoy this short read. May your sight lay hold of Him, may your ears hear His voice of release, and may your heart be lifted and filled with the liberating movement of the Holy Spirit.

¹ <http://www.albertmohler.com/2009/09/03/why-moralism-is-not-the-gospel-and-why-so-many-christians-think-it-is/>

² <https://carm.org/what-is-moralism>

1

What is Legalism?

*“For sin will have no dominion over you,
since you are not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14).*

Beginning in Romans 5:12 and running through chapter 8 there is provided a contrasting picture of what life was like IN ADAM and what it becomes when IN CHRIST. IN ADAM, people are slaves to sin. IN CHRIST, those same people become instruments of righteousness. Just as IN ADAM, they are identified by their position and controlled by the old nature, so also IN CHRIST, those same people are identified by their position and controlled by the new nature.

Part of this contrast is between the LAW and GRACE. To be in and under grace is to be free in Christ. To be in and under Law is to be in bondage and slavery. The term “legalist” describes one whom the Law is the means of securing one’s righteous standing before God and equally necessary in maintaining this same standing. As we seek to zero in on this idea let us ask the question, “What exactly do we mean by “legalism?”

Warren Wiersbe gives us this clear definition of legalism:

*“We must keep in mind that *legalism* does not mean the setting of spiritual standards; it means worshiping these standards and thinking that we are spiritual because we obey them. It also means judging other believers on the basis of these standards. The old nature loves legalism, because it gives the old nature a chance to ‘look good.’ ”¹*

Thus, legalism is not what you do; it is why you do it that makes you a legalist. John Piper correctly notes that “legalism is present whenever a person is trying to be ethical in his own strength.” He equally argues that legalism is present whenever we try to make other people ethical through conformity to rules. In so doing, we are lacking confidence in the sovereign power of God to complete that which He alone began and He alone can finish.² The deceptive nature of legalism shifts the message of Scripture from “what God has done for you,” to “what you do for Him.”

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legalist.*

As I have meditated on these things, I have noted nine observations concerning legalism. I trust you will find this helpful.

1. Legalism believes man’s obedience cooperates with grace instead of believing it is a consequence of grace. Any act of obedience on my part is simply a consequence of the Holy Spirit bearing His fruit in me and through me to those around me (Gal. 5:22-24).
2. Legalism believes what is received by grace must now be maintained by works. Rather, what I could not merit by works I cannot now maintain by works. The Christian life is from “grace to grace” (Gal. 3:1-5).
3. Legalism believes man’s obedience makes God a debtor to him. Our legalistic ways cause us to believe that God is obligated to “bless” us with “good things” because we have lived exemplary lives. When hardship comes we are shocked because we have done our best to “do right” (Eph. 1:3; Rom. 8:32).

4. Legalism views the New Testament commands as a moral obligation. The New Testament was not written to tell us how to live, but to show us what Christ is like. The commands are the outworking of the Holy Spirit bearing His fruit through “earthen vessels.” The righteousness imputed to us, the Holy Spirit works in us and through us to those around us. To think the believer is now obligated to carry out the New Testament commands is to place him under a burden he was never meant to bear. If our Christianity is anything other than “easy and light,” we have the wrong understanding (Matt. 11:28-30). If His commands are burdensome, then we have the wrong understanding (1 John 5:2, 3).
- The New Testament
was not written to tell
us how to live,
but to show us what
Christ is like.*
5. Legalism believes the saved individual is now capable, with the Holy Spirit’s enablement, to work in such a way as to merit divine favor. The truth is found in John 15:5, “without Him we can do *nothing*.” We are not co-laborers or sub-contractors with God, but rather tools and *only* tools.
6. Legalism fears disobedience because of divine retribution. The legalist lives in fear of “divine chastisement.” Yet we are assured that “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).
7. Legalism believes one’s judgment of others is infallible. Legalists delight in putting people into prearranged categories. Judgment is immediate and swift. Everyone is guilty until proven innocent.

8. Legalism places demands on others for conformity to their rules. The legalist must control through conformity or he will lose his grip. Diversity within unity is the great scourge to the legalist.
9. Legalism judges others based on their appearance. Legalists believe everyone must mimic them. Yet the infiniteness of God and the diversity of personalities in limitless cultures assure us that there is great multiplicity and diversity within the body of Christ.

I have no desire to stand in judgment of the assumed legalist. How tragic it would be for us to embrace grace and, in some twisted way, become legalistic toward those who differ from us.

Perhaps this short study will help us to see legalism in our own lives. May our courage be such that we will not rest until every residue of this devilish way has been blotted out of our presence. Grace living is “riskier” because it means we must take our hands off people and place them into the hands of Almighty God. Yet is such a transfer “risky?” Hardly. I would rather have us live under the watch-care of omnipotence than under the bane-filled eye of impotent man.

¹ Wiersbe, *Galatians*, 108-109.

² Piper, Brothers, *We Are Not Professionals*, 153-155.

2

Present Day Slave Traders

“Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery - to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.” (Gal. 2:4, 5).

It is hard for us to imagine the abject horror of being awakened in the night by the screams of terror as men, women, and children are carried off from knowing the joy of freedom into the chains of slavery. They were becoming the victims of slave traders, people whose livelihood depended upon human trafficking. Our nation poured out its lifeblood to resist and eventually overthrow slavery. Yet Paul continues to deal with spiritual slave traders, people whose intent is to make cargo of human souls. Their delight is found in taking captive those who were once free.

What appeared to be the problem in Galatia? Apparently the believers were being “unsettled” (5:12) by “false brothers” (2:4). The agitation created by them was real (4:17). They were “bewitched” (3:1) into leaving their position of liberty to be once more entangled with the yoke of bondage (5:1). Paul saw such a move as shocking (1:6). Why would anyone abandon a position of liberty for one of bondage? They were running well (5:7), but now were being “hindered” and thus “caught in a transgression” (6:1). Those who turned back had “fallen away from grace” (5:4) and needed to be “restored” (6:1).

Within the book of Galatians, there is a contrast taking place. On one hand you have the works of the law, and on the other you have justification by faith (2:16). Yet more is included than just our justification. There is a strong contrast throughout Galatians between “a system of works” and “a system of grace.” When laid side-by-side, the contrast is dramatic. Freedom is what all true believers enjoy in Christ. Why would anyone turn back to a life of bondage, inability, and failure? To betray grace and turn back is to fall from a previously maintained position.

This issue in Galatians is inclusive and highly misunderstood. The Christian life is to be one of grace through faith. Nowhere in the Christian life is one's work to be seen as cooperating with God in the dispensing of grace. Neither salvation, sanctification, nor service is a work-based activity. All three are areas in which God's unmerited and undeserved activity is taking place. The Christian life is marked by fruit bearing (John 15). It is something inherent within the dynamic of saving faith (Eph. 2:8-10). The book of Galatians attacks this whole idea of a man-centered theology. The work is God's work from start to finish. For us to think we must somehow contribute to the work of God is an attack against the very core of God's dealings with us. To preach a man-centered work-based theology is a perversion of grace and receives Paul's highest condemnation (1:7-9).

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However, let us not think the problem in the churches of Galatia was unique. Unfortunately, it is traceable throughout the New Testament record. It appears that as soon as the apostle Paul left, the church would almost immediately begin to defect in its “loyalty” to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul notes how in the churches of Corinth, the congregation began to believe the false teachers who were preaching a different Jesus, a different gospel, and a different Spirit (2 Corinthians 11:4). This downward trajectory did not happen over the decades, but perhaps weeks and months. The same idea is present in Colossians where the apostle warns them against those who with persuasive speech turns them toward a works righteousness (Col. 2:13-23). It is for this reason the apostle was singular in his message, "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2).

It is for this reason we say, one cannot be saved by embracing a "works attained salvation" (1:6-9). John MacArthur has correctly concluded that, "It is impossible to be a legalist and a Christian. To do a single thing to earn salvation is to vitiate [destroy] grace."¹ But one can be saved and be embracing a "works attained sanctification and service." Such a person needs to be restored to a position of grace. For such a person has fallen from grace (5:4; 6:1).

After reading Galatians, I must ask myself just how free am I? Do I live like a free man or am I still in bondage to the things of this world? Do I live in fear of what others might think if I fail to measure up to their expectations or if I somehow violate one of their "traditions?" It would appear from Galatians, I am far freer than I have ever thought or imagined. I no longer bear the weight of the "vertical," my relationship with God. What I could not do, Jesus did. He took my burden and "killed" it at the cross. The liberty expressed in Paul's epistle is not for the fulfillment of the flesh but the license to love unconditionally. What an incredible message. We are free to love unconditionally. A grace life is lived in dependence on Christ and manifests itself by an unconditional love.

Let us guard ourselves and the church from allowing present day slave traders to make cargo of the human soul and to sell us once again into slavery.

¹ MacArthur , *Galatians*, 39.

3

Learned Helplessness

“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” (Gal. 3:1).

The Bible makes a strong distinction between living under the Law and living under grace (Rom. 6:15), of being in bondage versus being set free (Gal. 5:1). The vast majority of people live lives of quiet desperation not knowing where they came from, why they are here, or where they are going. The Christian is to learn to live in the freedom in which Christ has set them free. This moves us from “having to,” to “wanting to.” It moves us from the sphere of duty to that of desire. We are not to live in the arena of punishment, but of pardon. We are to cease our doing and begin to enjoy our resting.

One of the glaring tragedies of the Christian life is the pharisaical bondage in which most believers live. It is a subtle slavery that goes mostly undetected by the individual. The vast majority of believers have embraced a freedom from hell’s damnation, only to live in bondage to their daily sin and a performance-based acceptance before God. They have never tasted true freedom. They are like the inmate who upon gaining a complete pardon has no idea how to function in freedom and so goes back to finding safety in the routines of his imprisonment. They are like the slave who has been released only to remain as a slave. Neither knows how to act or behave. They are both free but still act as if they are in bondage.

Have you ever wondered why the elephants in the zoo or at a circus do not just pull the little stake to which they are chained out of the ground and go on their merry way? When an elephant is small, the chain is attached to something that they cannot move. Day after day, the elephant will pull on the chain wanting to be free, but it can never break the chain or pull the stake free. After several weeks of training, the elephant will quit trying to get free. It has learned to be helpless.

Without understanding our position and identification in Christ before the Father, our walk before Him becomes tentative, fragile, and desperate. It will lack the confidence, assurance, and certainty that can and should be ours. We speak of obedience, service, and the imperatives of Scripture, and rightly so. Unfortunately, such speech is often in the absence of positional truth. We have made it sound as if God is absent from such activity. Our obedience has become markedly man-centered. Yet our acts of obedience, as expressed through our free choices, are the outworking of God's eternal purpose. If we can intellectually embrace the theology of the cross, then it will be possible to escape the roller coaster ride of uninformed emotionalism. The cross, properly understood, provides the fuel for a lifetime of obedience.

When one believes in the Lord Jesus Christ for the salvation of their soul, ignorance abounds. The recipient of Christ is often completely ignorant of the tremendous theological truth that had transpired and is transpiring all around them. It is not necessary to know all of these truths to be saved. It is necessary, however, to know all of it in order to "know all you are in Him and He is for you." It is only when you learn the truth that you can truly rest in His finished work.

With regard to the Galatians, Paul was astonished (Gal. 1:6), afraid (4:11) and perplexed (4:20) that anyone would leave the yoke of Christ (Matt. 11:28-30) for the yoke of slavery (Gal. 5:1). How does this happen? Drifting is almost inevitable if we do not anchor ourselves to the bedrock of positional truth. This appears to be the experience of the churches in Colossae, Galatia, and Corinth.

We drift back into slavery even though we are free. We place ourselves into bondage through our self-imposed rules and expectations. And then, we have the audacity to believe God is the cruel slave master keeping us there. Friend, the tiny stake holding you in slavery can be pulled out at any time. Christ has set you free.

4

“Pictures of Present Day Pharisees”

“Jesus said to them, ‘Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees’” (Matt. 16:6).

The Pharisees started well. Their intentions were noble, but somewhere along the way they lost sight of what truly mattered and in so doing their “traditions” took precedence over the very Word of God (Matt. 15; Mark 7). What does it mean to live under the law of legalism? It is tragic, but **Paul’s battle with legalism in the Galatian church is not yet finished.** If we learn anything from our Lord’s temptation in Matthew 4 and Peter’s statement in 1 Peter 5:8 it is that the devil is a relentless foe. Today’s victories are never sufficient for tomorrow’s battles. We would be foolish to think that legalism has not wormed its way into our own lives and into the life of the church. Legalism is an obstinate antagonist that has absolutely no scruples. It always parades itself as religious and spiritual.

What does a present day legalist look like? Let me make several observations from the biblical text.

First, a legalist believes his upbringing makes him a child of heaven (Matt. 2:9). He actually thinks where he was born, to whom he was born, and to what he was born makes him better than others. He is more concerned about obedience to rules than about the salvation and deliverance of the hurting (Matt. 9:11, 14, 34; 12:2; Luke 14:3; John 9:16). Rather than break their “traditions,”

*A legalist,
in his pursuit of
God, rejects Christ*

they would rather see the hurting despair, and the hungry die (Luke 7:39). A legalist loves money more than ministry (Luke 16:14). They have convinced themselves that a price can be put on the human soul.

Second, a legalist has become so ensnared by “rules” that they have thrown out the proverbial “baby with the bathwater.” They have rejected the chief cornerstone (Matt. 21:42). A legalist, in his pursuit of God, rejects Christ (Luke 5:21). He is always concerned about control, power, and conformity (Matt. 12:14). He will always endeavor to crush what he cannot control and alienate what he cannot understand (Matt. 21:46; 22:15; John 12:42). He must always attack the character of the non-conformist in order to discredit their ministry (Matt. 12:24).

Third, a legalist places more authority on his man-made rules than on the principles of Scripture (Matt. 15:1-9). Because he believes inanimate objects can have intrinsic moral value, he believes one can be defiled by contact with such things (Matt. 15:10, 11; Luke 11:38 [i.e. musical styles, tobacco, alcohol, food, body piercing, tattoos, attending the movie theater, etc.]). He is more troubled with taking in “filth” than talking filth. The legalist is so concerned with appearance that he misses the essence of godliness (Luke 11:42). A legalist is worried more about their image than reaching the lost (Luke 15:2).

The legalist will always endeavor to crush what he cannot control and alienate what he cannot understand.

Fourth, a legalist is easily offended when confronted with their hypocrisy (Matt. 15:12). Our Lord denounced legalism with some of the strongest words recorded in Scripture (Matt. 23). Though they are proud to be seen of men in the exercising of religious devotion (Matt. 23:5f), legalists are incapable of

maintaining their own standard (Matt. 23:3). Legalists are more concerned about appearance than ministry (Luke 5:30; 11:39). They are more concerned about man's perspective than God's. Legalists wish to monitor others more than themselves (Luke 6:7; 18:11). They will strain at the "gnat" and swallow the "camel."

Finally, legalists live for human applause and are offended when no one sees their "service" (Luke 11:43). Legalism is to be guarded against and warned of (Matt. 16:6).

Like the Pharisees we often start well, but somewhere along the way we lose our way. We slowly replace a relationship with form and ritual. Form and ritual are not wrong, but it can become empty of life. Instead of leveraging the "shadow" in our pursuit of God, we end up getting stuck in the shadow and thereby lose the substance. We deceive ourselves into believing spirituality, at least its appearance, is doable. This was a problem in Colossae.

²⁰ "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – ²¹ "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh" (Col. 2:20-23).

When we equate conformity with spirituality, Christianity becomes plastic and sterile. How tragic if in our pursuit of Christ we settle for the shadow and not the substance. May God awaken us to the ever present danger and may we seek

Him above all else. May our courage be such that we will not rest until every residue of legalism has been blotted out of the assembly.

5

A Misguided Motive for Legalism

*“Such 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 indulgences”
(Col 2:23 NIV).*

In the second chapter of Colossians, Paul addresses the subject of legalism head on. He begins by stating his reason for writing, “That they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:2, 3). He then goes on to exhort them to continue their pursuit of Him (2:6, 7) and not to let anyone distract them by imposing on them legalistic regulations (2:8). The Colossians were so easily distracted and deceived and captivated by things other than Christ.

Are we any different? Often, our motives start out pure. Traditions and rules are not necessarily bad things. Our finite minds cannot fully comprehend an infinite God and therefore the shadows we create enable us to imagine and experience what they ultimately represent. It is only when the shadows replace the reality that legalism rears its ugly head (2:17).

Colossians 2:23 gives us insight into why the Colossians believed their traditions and regulations were necessary: “Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom . . . but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgences” (2:23). They were trying to free themselves from the power of sin through their own self-imposed efforts. They lost sight of

the fact that they had already received the fullness of Christ (2:10), who alone gives the power to refrain from sin (2:10, 11). They forgot that they already died to sin and were made alive in Christ (2:13). They already were forgiven from all their sins (2:13) and were no longer under obligation to the written code (2:14). Sin and death were already conquered at the cross (2:15). They forgot what Christ had done, who He is for them, and who they now are in Him.

Paul gives three specific ways in which legalism can have the appearance of wisdom in the battle against sin (Col 2:23):

First, legalism can be present in self-imposed worship. Church attendance, Bible reading and prayer are good disciplines we would be wise to practice. But these forms of worship, as well as all other forms, do not earn us favor with God. They do not obligate Him to give us an extra jolt of power over our sinful indulgences. They do not earn a forgiveness that is already ours. The activities themselves are good, but they are only shadows of the worship we will one day experience in heaven. They are means by which we pursue Christ, not for what He can give us, but in gratitude for what He has given us. The form of worship is never to be legislated or judged by others, thereby, distracting the worshipper from the object of worship – Christ. How do you view church attendance, Bible study, or prayer? Are you so focused on earning God’s favor through these activities that you lose sight of Him? If so, realign your focus. Worship, in its purest form, is simply a pursuit of Him.

Second, legalism is evident in false humility. Humility, properly understood, is recognizing who we are in relationship to God. The legalist will try to tell us we are dirty rotten sinners who need to do this or that to regain God’s favor. This is false humility. Who we truly are, is described

for us in 2:9-15. Even when we sin, God's opinion of us is unchanged; we are forgiven (2:13). The grace extended to us in Christ leads us to a "true humility."

Humility causes us to recognize we are nothing without Him; yet, we have everything in Him. How do you view sin, confession, or even the Communion Service? Are you introspective and self-abasing or do you celebrate what Christ has done for you with gratitude and praise? Humility is found when you understand who you are in Him.

Humility causes us to recognize we are nothing without Him, yet, we have everything in Him.

Third, legalists will often focus on "harsh treatment of the body." They will impose impossible disciplines and unnecessary punishment on anyone who strays from their standards. Somehow, they once again believe this will keep their sinful indulgences in check. They have forgotten that their only source of power over sin is through Christ alone. Focusing on the avoidance of sin makes us captive to the methods of avoidance instead of directing us to Christ. This is not to say we ought not guard against sin and avoid temptation. These "disciplines" are good practices, but when properly exercised, the focus and pursuit is still on Christ rather than on the avoidance of sin. The punishment for our sin was taken care of at Calvary. Do you live in light of this truth, or do you punish yourself for sins committed? Do you believe that some discipline or ritual will rid you of your guilt? Friend, believe, "It is finished!" Do not be taken captive by any other claim.

Legalism is insidious. It is so easy to fall prey to the legalism of others as well as to self-imposed legalistic ways in our own lives. In Colossians, Paul specifically deals with the attempt to use legalism to tame our sinful expressions. Our motive in wanting to have power over sin is good. Our methods of

achieving that power are misguided if we look to anything other than Christ. The activities themselves may be good and right if we see them for what they are — shadows, pointing us to Christ (2:17). But when we look to the activities to achieve some benefit, or to judge others according to these activities, we have lost connection with the Head (2:19) and slipped into legalism. Recognize it for what it is. Then once again, set your hearts and minds on things above (3:1, 2). He alone is our source of power over sin and He alone is to be pursued. When our focus is on Him, everything else fades into the background. Worship Christ alone, humbly and with gratitude, for the freedom He has secured in your behalf.

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other than Christ.*

6

Freedom from the Formulaic Imagery of the Victorious Life

*“But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory
through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57).*

How often have you heard someone state “ten” steps to the victorious Christian life? Or “five” steps to living in victory? Large segments of Christianity have reduced victory to conforming to a certain predefined set of rules. This is a return to a works-based acceptance before the Father. This is legalism. Who would have ever thought the idea of the victorious Christian life would have to be freed from such legalistic tendencies?

In what way has legalism slipped into our thinking with regard to living the victorious Christian life?

First, we have a tendency to turn our thoughts and ideas into goals to be reached. With the desire to reach the goal, there is an equally strong inclination toward formulizing the means to that goal. In so doing, we become step oriented. This is a strongly legalistic tendency.

The goal, however, is something that is unattainable in this life. We pursue Him, but what He fully is for us and we are in Him will not be completely disclosed this side of the grave. Thus we run, knowing we will not obtain all there is for us in this life.

There is equally the idea that the Christian life is something formulaic. There is a strong tendency to reduce everything to its bare minimum. "If only I do this or that, then I too will be walking in victory." However, what happens when the steps are followed, but "victory" is not the result? An introspective questioning begins as to whether or not the "steps" were adequately fulfilled. This is how hideous and seductive legalism becomes.

Second, we have a tendency to make what we perceive as the goal the standard for measuring everything else. Non-conformity to the perceived image communicates failure and disappointment. This is a second legalistic tendency.

As soon as we say, "This is what victory looks like," we rush to push everything into that mold. This, likewise, is an expression of legalism. How many times have we judged someone for being less than what is expected, assuming that such an individual cannot surely be living the victorious Christian life. Any time we try to push people into our perceived mold we are becoming legalistic. Unity through conformity must be avoided at all costs. There is only one standard and His name is Jesus. Jesus Christ is as diversified as personalities and cultures, and as limitless as He is infinite.

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such an individual cannot surely be living the victorious Christian life. Any time we try to push people into our perceived mold we are becoming legalistic. Unity through conformity

Third, peaks and valleys mark the typical Christian life. To a legalist, the defining moment of the victorious life is a peak day. Thus, everything that is non-peak is judged non-victorious. This is a third legalistic tendency. What we fail to understand is that the victorious Christian life is the peaks and valleys. God has yet to waste one moment of His actions in our lives. What is a peak day anyway? We typically define a peak day as the kind of day where everything goes our way.

We are well rested, fed, loved, and accepted. Yet how many of those days actually exist? Why does this define a peak day? Why could not a valley day be a peak day?

How do we know as to whether or not our brokenness is not the breaking up of fallow ground for the receiving of His Word? How do we know as to whether or not our tears are not the watering of the seed received? How do we know as to whether or not our trials are not the weeding of His garden? We do not know, so should we not therefore believe that this is all true? God is doing a work that is always before Him. He is not wasting a moment or an “ounce” of energy. Everything is working together for His glory and our good.

A popular teaching in Christian circles is that somehow we need to earn a favorable reception by the King when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ. A person who obviously sees things differently made the following comments to me. Her thoughts correctly point out the error in this thinking.

“Oh, my! I don't have a ‘moment of divine favor.’ Praise God! I have an eternity of divine favor, because of the worthiness and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Grace is undeserved favor. This [idea] seems to focus on how to earn the unearned, how to manipulate the free gift, how to deserve the undeserved. It seems to be trying to provide a recipe for access to God instead of realizing access to God is through Jesus Christ alone. It's just incredibly sad.

I don't have a ‘moment in His presence.’ I have an eternity in His presence because of Jesus Christ, praise to His name.

Another subtlety of the [idea] is to say 'there was a bad day' but 'it became a good day' because of something I did. 'Things were going wrong but then started to go right.' We don't have a clue which is which! We may think 'this is wrong' when God is saying 'oh, no, my child, this is right.' We may think 'this is bad' when God is saying 'oh, no, my child, this is very good.' In fact, God causes ALL things to work together for good to those who are the called according to His purpose. 'It's all good' really applies. I have spent way too much of my life trying to evaluate what is 'good' and 'bad' in what is happening in my life. An unexpected financial gift = good. A child with health issues = bad. A day of harmony in my home = good. A day with tension in relationships = bad. We can't see the truth of our own situations.

I have spent way too much time trying to 'make my life good' on my own terms and being disappointed and discouraged when what is happening doesn't match up with my perfect picture. It is a way of thinking which leads to depression and discouragement for sure. To rest in the fact that 'it's all good' is much needed.

I am overflowing with praise that God has chosen to show me so clearly that my access to Him and fellowship with Him is not just a moment, but forever. I have found favor with the King. That's the very definition of grace.

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Sometimes I ask the Lord why He left me so long in error regarding confession and fellowship, because it was so deadly discouraging. But I know that season was purposeful also. I can truly appreciate the freedom of

the truths I've written above because of the contrast. I long for people everywhere to be freed from believing that favor with God must be earned or worked for, because that is anti-grace and anti-Christ. I believe it originates from Satan himself, because he wants to deny the sufficiency of Jesus Christ and diminish the extent of God's grace, lest God would receive more praise from us.

I really have no other message for the rest of life, however long that may be. I want to say it and say it and say it for the glory of God."

We are victorious because Christ is victorious. He imputed His victory to us. Jesus said, "It is finished!" Are we going to believe him? Or are we going to try to earn favor when He already secured it for us? Legalism is not only with reference to our initial justification but also in our ongoing sanctification and glorification. Paul makes this clear in both Galatians 3:1-6 and in Colossians 2:20-3:5. We cannot accurately assess our own "success" or the success of others. We need not even try. Believe that you are right where God would have you. Your life is a trophy of His victory. Do not let the legalistic judgments of another rob you of the peace and joy that comes with resting in the victory Christ secured in your behalf.

7

The Works of the Flesh [versus] the Fruit of the Spirit

*“Now the works of the flesh are evident . . .
but the fruit of the Spirit is . . .” (Gal. 5:19-23).*

The contrast could not be more dramatic. Even the word used to describe the outworking of both is telling: “Deeds/Works” versus “Fruit.” In the context of Galatians, the irony of the setting should not escape us. The works of the flesh are those activities produced by seeking to gain spirituality through a system of rules and regulations, whereas the fruit of the Spirit are those activities produced by resting in His finished work. Let us consider for just a moment the two lists:

The Works of the Flesh	The Fruit of the Spirit
Immorality Impurity Sensuality	Love Joy Peace
Idolatry Sorcery	
Enmities Strife Jealousy	Patience Kindness Goodness
Fits of anger Rivalries Dissensions Divisions Envy	Faithfulness Gentleness
Drunkenness Orgies	Self-control
And things like these	Against such there is no law
Those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God	Heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:29)

The two groups are clearly marked. The contrast is established through opposites. For example, the opposite of love, joy, peace is immorality, impurity and sensuality. The person who is filled with enmities, strife and jealousy is not exhibiting patience, kindness, and goodness. Likewise, the drunkard and carouser do not have self-control.

Any attempt on our part to produce the fruit of the Spirit manufactures fake fruit which is, in reality, a work of the flesh.

Only law labors, whereas grace rests. Because it is the fruit of *the Spirit*, it is not something the believer can do. The tragedy of this is in trying to produce the fruit of the Spirit. Any attempt on our part to produce the fruit of the Spirit manufactures fake fruit which is, in reality, a work of the flesh. Hence,

what we hope to do in producing spiritual fruit in the end turns against us and will stand as our accuser. The emphasis is not on trying to produce spiritual fruit. The quest or real struggle is to rest in Him, believing He will complete the work He began (2 Thess. 5:23, 24). We are to assume and rest in knowing fruit is being born by the Spirit in and through the life of His people.

The question that needs to be addressed is what am I to do if I see the works of the flesh being manifested in me? Because I still have within me an "old nature," I am going to sin. At some point in time you will, against your desires, exhibit "flesh." So what is a believer suppose to "do" with sin? Several actions are stated in the Scripture. Each one of the following is to be viewed as a *Fruit of the Spirit*. No one, apart from the inward working of the Holy Spirit, can "do" these actions. In the midst of my personal inability and spiritual failures, I am to rest in the confidence of His divine strength

in performing that which He promised (Phil. 1:6; 2 Thess. 5:23, 24). There are more expressions of fruit than listed, but these seven are characteristic of the kinds of actions He is producing in me and through me concerning my response to the “flesh.”

First, we will see the fruit of casting off the works of darkness (Rom. 13:12).

Second, we will see the fruit of making no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Rom. 13:14).

Third, we will see the fruit of cleansing ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit (2 Cor. 7:1).

Fourth, we will see the fruit of putting off the old self (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9).

Fifth, we will see the fruit of putting to death what is earthly: sexual immorality and impurity. (Col. 3:5; Rom. 8:13).

Sixth, we will see the fruit of abstaining from passions of the flesh, which wage war against our souls (1 Pet. 2:11).

Seventh, we will see the fruit of agreeing with God concerning the nature of our sin, knowing that He has, is, and always will be forgiving us (1 John 1:9).

Please do not see the Fruit of the Spirit as a work to be performed or a standard to be attained. Keep your focus on the author and finisher of your faith. Believe that He has and will take care of your sin issue for you. Learn to celebrate all that you are in Him and He is for you. Learn to stop trying to do what has already been done. Grace enables us to live within the family of our fellowship with love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Truly, against such there is no law.

8

A Friend of Sinners

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds” (Matt. 11:19).

Have you ever thought it odd that our Lord embraced “the sinner” but denounced “the religious?” Why was this His apparent practice? I believe the answer can be found in contrasting grace with legalism. Grace is transparent and honest; legalism is hypocritical and pretentious. Grace can be reckless in its identification and commitment, whereas legalism can be rigid, demanding, and stingy in its love.

Sinners see themselves for who they are in light of God’s rigid standard. The religious see themselves in comparison to their contemporaries. Sinners have nothing to hide; they are known for who they are. The religious have everything to lose; they are afraid of being known.

To live graciously is to love without condition (Gal. 5:13), accept without requirement (Eph. 4:32), forgive without limit (Matt. 18:22), favor without merit (John 8:10, 11), and serve without reward (Luke 6:35). Christ is gracious. He reaches out to everyone and embraces all who come (Matt. 11:28-30).

A gracious response puts body unity over doctrinal conformity. Jesus said, “He who is not with me is against me” (Matt. 12:30). Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one

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for another” (John 13:34, 35).

Within a grace fellowship there is always the potential of “shooting the wounded.” Often we find ourselves condemning the immoral, isolating the flagrant, and denouncing the addict while carelessly “winking” at the divisive, the gossip, and the belittler.

Which sin is worse? Would we rather have the gossip instead of the adulterer? Are we more willing to accept the person who is divisive rather than the person wrestling with an addiction? Do we really want to categorize sin? It is not the “sin” that is the problem; it is our arrogant self-righteous spirit that is the true problem. Jesus embraced sinners, but He had strong words for the religious leaders of His day (Matt. 23). He called them, “hypocrites.”

- They were hypocrites because they believed they were right without humility.
- They were hypocrites because they believed they were right without teachability.
- They were hypocrites because they believed they were right without charity.
- They were hypocrites because they were selective in their love, acceptance, forgiveness, and service.

We should always strive for doctrinal precision, but not at the expense of body unity. There is a doctrinal core about Jesus that has to be believed in order to be saved. Everything other than that demands a certain level of tolerance and acceptance.

We should always strive for doctrinal precision, but not at the expense of body unity.

Years ago, when I was a student in Bible College, a man who had seen his share of battles said, “You can be so right that

you are wrong.” In our quest for truth, let us not become pharisaical. Let us always strive to invite into our circle the burden bearer, the brokenhearted, and those who are living in relational disillusionment.

We cannot afford to be so right that we are sterile and impotent. Living graciously is living in the salt mines. It is rolling up the sleeves of service and washing the feet of the filthy. I am convinced that only when we have entered into spiritual warfare will we begin to see the pettiness of our preferential idiosyncrasies and doctrinal clichés and cliques. May it be said of us, “They are a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”

A Final Word

Christian legalism is the attempt to merit favor and avoid sin, yet such attempts are works of the flesh when done in the absence of Christ. Biblical holiness is a consequence of one's union with Christ and thus it cannot be caused by the work of the flesh. We must desert the fields of sin and let them lay fallow at our feet and plant into the rich and fertile fields of delight in Christ. We must forsake with forceful repudiation relationships that tempt us into parasitical bondage and live in the treasures of God's abundant storehouse.

Our own legalistic expressions are as wicked as that of the immoral and the addicted. Both are equally wrong. May we learn to live in the richness of Christ and in the abundance of His cross work.



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