

The Cure for Legalism

November 30, 2014

INTRODUCTION

Today I want to start off with a quiz. You can find it in the center panel of your program. As you read the following list, keep track of those statements which you either “agree” or “disagree” with:

- **God's love for me depends on what I do.**
- **The external choices a person makes (in what they wear, hairstyle, piercings, tattoos, etc.) are a clear indication of that person's character.**
- **By trying hard, I believe I can keep the laws and commandments of God.**
- **When I happen to miss a Sunday morning service or a church activity I feel guilty.**
- **God is predisposed to be angry with me because I am a sinner. My main goal in life is to try to gain or maintain God's favor by doing things that will impress him.**
- **Meeting the expectations of others, especially those in my church or in positions of authority, is very important.**
- **Moral and ethical questions are usually black and white.**
- **I often get down on myself because I don't have enough faith, or because I haven't prayed enough, or because I just need to be a better person.**
- **I worry that people might take advantage of grace if it's preached too much —people might think they can do anything they want.**
- **I believe that it is wrong for anyone to drink alcohol or to go to “R” rated movies.**

If you “agreed” with any of the statements on the quiz, then you have been affected by legalism either in the past or the present. Each one of these statements, in one form or another, is rooted in legalism. If you are wondering what legalism is, here’s a simple definition:

Legalism, simply defined, is:

“an obsessive conformity to an artificial standard for the purpose of exalting oneself.” Chuck Swindoll

It is an attitude based on pride and self-sufficiency. The legalist says, “I’m the man,” like the song we heard just said. Legalism says, “I do this or I don’t do that, therefore I am pleasing to God.” Or “if only I could do this or do that, then I would be pleasing to God.” Or perhaps even, “These things I’m doing or not doing are the things I perform to win God’s favor.”

Now the things a legalist does may or may not be commanded in the Scripture, but legalists believe that by doing them, they will please God, feel better about themselves and maintain a sense of superiority toward others. Legalism is rigid, exacting and law-like in nature. It leads to an emphasis on what one should or should not be and on what one should or should not do.

It has been described by some as false Christianity because it looks and sounds like the real thing. But it's a fake...an imitation of Christianity, an empty, hollow counterfeit of the real thing. It is a burdensome drag upon a person's spiritual life that creates a sense of bondage and guilt. None of us are immune from it. It creeps into our lives in subtle and destructive ways. Today I want to talk about the dangers of legalism and expose it for what it is, false Christianity. In addition, I want to offer a cure for anyone today who is suffering under the weight of it.

As we prepare to dive into today's message, I want to clarify one thing: today's message is not a part of the "Faith that works" series. This is a standalone message that's been on my heart for some time. Hopefully you will benefit from this subject matter as much as I have.

As I said a minute ago, legalism is simply "an obsessive conformity to an artificial standard for the purpose of exalting oneself." The word "legalism" doesn't actually occur anywhere in the Bible. It is a term Christians often use to describe an approach to God that emphasizes a system of rules and regulations for achieving both salvation and spiritual growth.

Now if you are curious like me, you might wonder where this idea of legalism came from and how it got started in the first place. In order to answer that question, we have to go back and look at the origin of God's law in Old Testament history.

The Beginning of the Law and Legalism

Most people would trace the beginning of God's law to the time of Moses. To understand why the Mosaic Law (i.e. 10 Commandments) was created, you have to look at three months LEADING UP TO the giving of the 10 commandments. The three months prior to the giving of the law began with a miraculous deliverance of the nation of Israel from the hands of the pharaoh of Egypt. God sent:

10 plagues against the land of Egypt while protecting the Israelites.

After these plagues, the bible says that Pharaoh finally released Moses and the Israelites from bondage and they headed out to the wilderness. But soon after they left, Pharaoh changed his mind and chased after them in the wilderness. When the Israelites came to the shore of the Red Sea, God miraculously parted the waters for them and they escaped, while Pharaoh's army was destroyed as the sea came crashing down upon them. (By the way, there's a new movie coming out in December called, "Exodus: Gods & Kings, that tells the whole story.)

Now you would think that this miraculous series of deliverances by God would have had a profound effect on the nation of Israel. You'd think their trust in God would be rock solid. But just three days later as they are travelling in the desert, we read:

And the people murmured against Moses saying, "What shall we drink?" Exodus 15:24

How quickly they forgot the deliverance and power of God in their lives. So what did God do for them after they murmured against Moses? He graciously led them (in spite of their murmurings) to an oasis at a place called Elim where there were 12 wells of water and 70 palm trees.

Now after all that, you would assume that they would have appreciated God's grace and confessed their sinful attitudes, right? No way. When they left Elim and came to Mt. Sinai two months later, the same thing happens all over again. Once more they start murmuring. The whole congregation grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them:

**“If only we had died by the LORD’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”
Exodus 16:2-3 NIV**

How could these people, whom God delivered time and time again, be so blind to their own sin and ungratefulness? The real question should be more like: Why didn’t God punish them? Why didn’t he send down fire from heaven and destroy the whole nation? Here’s the answer: They were under grace. Israel was still under the covenant of grace that God began when he made a covenant with Abraham centuries before. You can read about the Abrahamic covenant in the book of Genesis.

In spite of all God’s grace toward them, the Israelites rebelled again and again. What was wrong with these people? The answer is simple. They never grasped the magnitude of their sin. They never owned up to the character and nature of their rebellion. In addition, they didn’t appreciate the fact that God was gracious and merciful and spared them of his wrath. They thought they deserved better treatment from God. They didn’t think any of this was their fault. They thought they were perfectly obeying God.

It is for all the reasons I just mentioned that God had to give them the Mosaic law. In other words:

God gave them the law to reveal their sin and to show them what sin looks like.

These rebellious people were blind to their own sin. The journey from Egypt had proven that they wouldn’t obey God’s commands or keep his covenant. They had failed again and again yet God graciously forgave them each time. But apparently they had not grasped the abundance of God’s grace or gravity of their sin. Not only that, they also wrongly assumed they could do, through their own self effort, whatever God’s law required of them.

You would have thought that when God gave them the Law through Moses, they would have fallen to their knees and cried out, “Oh no! We can’t do this! We need God’s grace.” But instead, we hear them say JUST THE OPPOSITE. When Moses came from Mt. Sinai and called the elders of the people and set before them the law, all the people answered together and said:

“All that the LORD has spoken WE WILL DO.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. (Exodus 19:7,8 ESV)

Without any hesitation, the Israelites proclaimed they could DO all that God commanded them. In that single statement, we find the root of legalism. The root of legalism is this idea that WE CAN DO, through sheer self-effort and determination, whatever the Lord requires of us. It would be like you or I saying to God, “I’m the man (or I’m the woman) who can do this. I don’t need your help.” So the Lord, in order to show them the utter foolishness of their self-sufficiency, gives them the law which will convince them of the very opposite. God’s law will show them that:

Man cannot be saved by keeping the law, but still needs the grace of God.

Israel chose to live by legalistic self-effort INSTEAD OF by God’s unconditional grace and too often we do the same. Too often we choose to depend on ourselves to live by God’s laws instead of trusting in God’s grace. Too often we foolishly think we can keep God’s law by our own self-effort. And this brings me to one of my main points today:

God’s law wasn’t given to make us into better people. The law was given to show us we are sinners INCAPABLE of being good.

This is the the essence of what it says in Romans 5:

The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more. Romans 5:20 (NIV)

As the verse says, the law was given to show us we are sinners in need of a Savior. The law wasn't given as a way to make us right with God. The Israelites looked at the law of God and the 10 Commandments as a self-improvement program. Yet God's purpose for giving them the law was to amplify their sin so that they could more readily recognize it in their lives. Just like a guitar amplifier boosts the sound coming off guitar strings, the law of God boosts our awareness of sin so that we can see just how needy we are for God's grace. On the contrary, legalism does the opposite. Legalism misapplies the law and makes it into a self-sufficient system of rules by which we attempt to earn our salvation and maintain our acceptance before God. Whenever we misunderstand the purpose of the law and misapply it, we can so easily get caught in the trap of legalism. So let's take a minute to talk about...

The Futility of Legalism

As we just saw in our Old Testament history lesson, this harmful approach to God known as legalism first appeared in the nation of Israel but it is just as common in churches and individuals today. For example, many churches use the 10 Commandments, or other selected portions of the Old Testament Law as the basis for their "Code of Conduct". They may even toss in a few more rules to handle the more modern sins that need to be avoided. Individuals also create codes of conduct in the form of "DO & Don't DO" lists like the one of the screen:

- **Do not drink coffee**
- **Limit your TV viewing to NFL Football and NCIS**
- **No alcohol, drugs or loud music.**
- **Stay out of casinos, nightclubs, and dance halls**
- **Don't throw your dog's poo over your fence into your neighbor's yard.**

Maybe you have one like this yourself. But here's the question: do these legalistic codes of conduct actually accomplish anything? Not according to the Scriptures:

Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?" These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. 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 indulgence. Colossians 2:20-23 NIV

Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch! Commands like these, or any other set of rules, are created to ensure that we will conform to some standard. On the surface, they seem like a reasonable approach to take if you want to be sure you stay in line with what God expects of you. They even sound biblical. But they are really of no value in helping you to maintain purity or to restrain sensual indulgence.

Let me ask you a question: How many of us will consistently follow rules that tell us not to do something we really want to do, especially when there is no immediate consequence of breaking the rule? I'm sure there are a few people who manage to follow a strict code of conduct that they set up for themselves; but that's more the exception than the rule.

One of my first experiences of trying to live by a legalistic set of rules occurred when I was a new Christian in

my early twenties. After I became a Christian in college, I felt convicted of my need to read the bible on a daily basis. At the time, I was horribly inconsistent with my morning quiet times with God and I wanted to change my habits. So one day, as I was listening to Christian radio, I heard a bible teacher talk about setting up a rule that would help you become more consistent with your bible reading. The rule was simply this:

No bible... no breakfast.

When I first heard this little rule, I thought, “Wow. Now there’s the answer I’ve been looking for. I’ll just set up this little rule and finally become consistent in my bible reading.” I thought this sounded like such a good idea that I even made a vow to God that I would not eat breakfast until I spent some time reading my bible.

On the surface, this all sounded like a good idea, but before long it began to have a negative effect on my spiritual life. To make a long story short, within a month of trying to live by this rule, I was miserable. In fact, I began to resent the fact that I HAD TO read my bible before eating my breakfast. I got so irritated with this little rule that I began to devise ways of getting around it. For example, I would look for the smallest passage in the bible to read so that I could get to my breakfast faster. Is that stupid or what! The negative effect of this little rule on my life illustrates the futility of legalism. It never produces the fruit we hope it will produce. In fact, it produces the opposite...bad fruit. It will either produce guilt, condemnation and resentment, when we fail to live up to our standards, OR it will produce arrogance and pride if we think we can keep our strict regimen of rules better than everyone else. Either way, legalism is an exercise in futility because it only produces bad fruit in the long run.

Now let’s push pause for a minute. I’m sure all this talk about legalism has raised some questions in your mind. For example, I’m sure some of you are wondering, “Does that mean that all rules are bad?” If that’s your concern, I can understand why. It’s easy to assume that by condemning legalism, I’m also condemning all rules or codes of conduct. Just to be clear, that’s NOT what I’m saying. Some codes of conduct, especially the ones given by God, are good. That’s what Paul says in Romans 7:

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” Romans 7:7 ESV

God’s law and commandments aren’t bad. They are good. The problem isn’t with the commands or codes of conduct. The problem is with what the rules have to work with, that is, our sinful human flesh. The problem is inside of us. The problem is our sin nature. Paul restates this again in Romans 7:

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. Romans 7:14-18 ESV

Did you catch that last line? The problem is with us, not with the law. We are utterly incapable of carrying it out. You and I cannot keep God’s law, no matter how hard we try. We will eventually fail, no matter how spiritual the rules and lists are that we attempt to live by. We will fail because we have a sin problem that prevents us from succeeding. Until we grasp the fact that we’re not adequate to keep God’s law, we will continually try to live by (and depend on) a set rules or commandments to maintain our relationship with him. That was never their purpose of God’s law and so we must stop trying to use it in a way that it was never intended to be used.

So if the commandments of God were never intended to be a set of rules to live by, what good is God’s law? The answer to that question is my second main point:

God's Law was not only given to reveal our sin, but also to lead us to grace.

The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 5:20, 21 (NIV)

The Law of God has two purposes in our lives: #1: to show us that we are sinners in need of a Savior; #2: to point us to the new covenant of grace found in Jesus Christ. When handled properly, God can use the law to not only convict us of our sin (i.e. to show us that we covet things that aren't ours) but to also lead us to the remedy for our sin, which is the grace offered in Jesus Christ. Ultimately, grace is the cure for all of our problems with sin. But grace is also the cure for legalism. Grace is the cure for that obsessive desire within each of us to conform to an artificial standard for the purpose of exalting ourselves.

Grace: The Cure for Legalism

So if grace is so wonderful and is the cure for legalism, what is grace and how does it work?

To begin with, grace is a free gift offered to us by God through Jesus Christ. When you and I put our faith in Jesus Christ as savior and Lord, we gain access to grace. A simple definition of grace looks like this:

“Grace is God doing for you what you do not deserve and cannot do for yourself with no strings attached.”

Grace refers to favor that God freely gives without expecting anything in return. It is God treating us better than we deserve but not because of anything we have done (or promise to do) and not because of anything God desires to get from us.

In the context of salvation, grace means God saves us without us having to do anything whatsoever (or promise to do anything whatsoever) to atone for any and all of our failings.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. Eph. 2:8, 9 NIV

That's how grace works for our salvation. In the context of our spiritual growth, also known as “sanctification”,

Grace comes to us in two forms: forgiveness and empowerment. Forgiveness is the removal of guilt for our sins and empowerment is the offer of God's infinite resources to live a life that's pleasing to him.

We agreement from God to be gracious, that is to provide infinite resources and unlimited forgiveness, is called “The New Covenant”. It was prophesied in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah and repeated in the New Testament book of Hebrews.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.” Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 8:10-12 NIV

God's New Covenant provisions of empowerment and forgiveness were offered to both the old and new

communities, to Israel and the church. Therefore, this idea of grace didn't start in the New Testament. It's an eternal concept. We can find just as many examples of God's grace in the Old Testament as we can in the New Testament.

So here's the bottom line where grace and the New Covenant are concerned: God has provided everything we need for life and godliness. Whenever we sin or fail as Christians, we are forgiven, no strings attached. Whenever we need to do something, we are given power by the Holy Spirit of God to accomplish the task. All we need to do is to rely on and trust in the Holy Spirit to work within us.

Let me give you an example of how this works. Let's say that you have just read in the bible this morning that you are to "love your neighbor as yourself." This is the second of the greatest commandments found in Mark 12:31. As you head into work, you are now consciously aware of your need to love your co-workers. But let's say that when you get to work, you discover that your boss is extremely grumpy. Not only is he grumpy, but he also unjustly criticizes you in front of another co-worker. Now let's say that instead of treating him with love and respect, you respond back to him with a sarcastic remark about his lack of communication skills. We've all been in situations like this where we've impulsively said or did the wrong thing.

So how does grace work in a situation like the one with your boss? If you are a Christian, you'll most likely feel convicted not long after those sarcastic words left your mouth. You will feel a sense of sorrow and remorse. Now this is where the first provision of the grace kicks in: forgiveness. Because of Christ death on the cross, you are forgiven, no strings attached. Even though you spoke harshly to your boss, you are not condemned by God. You can remind yourself of the forgiveness you have in Christ and be restored. No need to keep beating yourself up over in the incident.

But God doesn't want you to stop there. God not only wants to forgive you, but to empower you to do the right thing. So soon after you experience the forgiveness of God for your mistake, you will most likely be prompted by the Holy Spirit to apologize. This is when you get to experience the second provision of grace: empowerment. By relying on the Holy Spirit's power, you can walk into your boss' office and say, "I'm sorry for what I said to you." Regardless of whether your boss deserves an apology or honors your confession, you know you have obeyed God by relying on the Holy Spirit to make things right. That's how the empowerment of Holy Spirit works: it allows you to do the right thing even when your flesh resists it. You see, you don't need a list of rules or

In every situation in life, like the one I just described, we have a choice. On one hand, we can live by God's grace, and receive forgiveness when we fail and rely on the Holy Spirit's power to succeed, OR we can rely on our own strength and our own set of rules which will only end up damaging ourselves and hurting others.

As we bring this message to a close, I realized that I've just scratched the surface in explaining how grace works and how grace is the cure for this thing called legalism. I'd encourage you to go out on our website and listen to all of the messages on grace that Rick gave last fall. They will help you in your quest for better understand the implications of grace.

I just want to say in closing, it's been my experience, having lived under both the bondage of legalism and the freedom of grace, that grace is the better way. And after I pray, the band is going to sing a song about grace called "Greater". Listen closely to the lyrics. Let the words of the song wash over your soul. You don't have to live in guilt, condemnation and bondage any more. There is a greater and better way. It's called grace. Let's pray.