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The Snare of Legalism

By David Dunlap

One of the greatest hindrances in our Christian life is the subtle trap of legalism. It is an age-old foe to God's plan for joy and power in the Christian life. From the earliest days of the church, legalism has thrown Christians off course and side-tracked them. And today it is just as active and destructive as it ever was. It is important to understand that a legalist is not just someone with higher standards or more rules than others. Many consider a legalistic person to be someone who does not go to movies, who wears out-dated clothes, or who thinks music with a strong beat is wrong. However, legalism is much more serious and dangerous than that. We might define legalism as "obedience to a set of laws for the purpose of exalting self and gaining acceptance by God." In other words, a legalist is anyone who behaves as if he can earn God's approval and a better standing through personal performance.

The Problem of Legalism

While the legalist thinks this is the right path, he soon finds that this road is strewn with spiritual dangers. Instead of joy in his Christian walk, he finds frustration; in the place of power in service, he experiences soul-anguish and despondency. With careful insight, author C. H. Mackintosh (1820-1896) warns:

Legalism will lead us to measure our standing before God by our own progress in personal holiness, our efforts, our services, our doings, our ways, our feelings, our frame, our something or other. All this produces spiritual darkness, gloomy uncertainty, mental bondage, intense soul-torture, depression, irritability, and sourness of temper... The harp is hung on the willow. The hymn of joyous praise is only occasionally sung. The worship of the Lord is abandoned, or if not abandoned, is merely gone through—without freshness, unction, power, or depth of spiritual tone.¹

Legalism is an immensely serious problem, so much so that God has devoted the entire book of Galatians to combating legalism. Keep in mind that the book of Galatians was not written to those who were unsaved, but to those who already knew Christ. Paul was greatly concerned because these believers were trying to live out the Christian life by keeping the law! The heresy of legalism involves telling people that there are certain things that they must do to enhance their standing with God! Paul writes: "After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain perfection by human effort?" (Gal. 3:3 NIV).

“Christianity is a living divine reality.

It is not a set of doctrines, however true; a system of ordinances, however imposing; a number of rules, however important. It is a living, breathing, speaking, active, powerful reality.

Christianity is the life of Christ communicated to the believer—dwelling in him and flowing out of him.”

C. H. Mackintosh
(1820-1896)

Legalism is one of the favorite weapons of the enemy. He loves to entangle Christians with rules, laws, spiritual pride, and introspection, thereby ruining their enjoyment of the Spirit. He, then, can use them to spread this spiritual virus among other active, joyful, and growing Christians. That is exactly what happened in Galatia. Here was a group of young Christians who had a wonderful beginning. They had turned to faith in Christ at the gospel preaching of the apostle Paul and then gave themselves totally to Christ. Paul was enthusiastic about this group of shining devoted believers. But, after a while, a report came to him that legalism had set in, and this canker was taking its toll. What had once been a bright and marvelous testimony for God had now become a dull, apathetic group of religionists—almost devoid of spiritual life. Dispensational author Ray Stedman warns Christians today:

Legalism destroys! It did then, and it does the same thing today. I know of no affliction in Christendom which is more widespread, and more devastating in its destructiveness, than this. Across the world today many churches are sunken into a pall of boredom and futility largely because of the legalistic spirit which has throttled their spiritual vitality.²

The legalistic person has forgotten, or possibly has never understood, the importance of the cross of Christ. When we shift our focus away from the cross of Christ, legalism slowly and subtly chips away at our understanding of salvation. Legalists, feel that they can earn acceptance and approval by God through their own set of rules for the Christian life. Thus, legalism begins to affect our Christian life in ways we never imagined.

Sanctification and Legalism

At the root of legalism is a misunderstanding of the doctrine of sanctification. After a person comes to faith in Christ, God immediately begins the process of making that sinner more like His Son. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the power of His Word, and fellowship with other believers, God gives power over sin, renews our minds, and changes our lives. This work of God in our lives is called “sanctification.” Sanctification is the process of becoming more like Christ and growing in holiness. This process begins the instant you are converted and will not end until you meet the Lord face-to-face in heaven.

Nearly every person who struggles with legalism has had a faulty understanding of the similarities and differences between sanctification and justification. Without understanding the distinction between the two, you will be more vulnerable to legalism. An understanding of these theological terms is vital in defeating legalism.

JUSTIFICATION - Justification is the act of being declared righteous by virtue of the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 4:25). Justification is our position before God. It takes place immediately when we place faith in Christ. Justification is instantaneous and complete at the time of conversion. You will never be more justified than you were the first moment you trusted in the Person and finished work of Christ.

SANCTIFICATION - On the other hand, sanctification is the process of being made holy, that is, being conformed to the image of Christ.

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Ray Stedman

(1917-1992)

Personal secretary to H. A. Ironside and founder of Peninsula Bible Church, CA

Sanctification is our practice of living for Christ. It is a process of growing in Christlikeness. You will be more sanctified as you grow in grace and in obedience to the will of God.

The Legalist's Mistake

Scripture teaches there is a clear distinction between justification and sanctification. Yet the legalist makes a fundamental and serious error. He confuses his own ongoing participation in the process of sanctification with God's finished work in justification. In other words, he thinks that godly practices and good works somehow contribute towards his standing and approval before God. The legalist allows his performance of spiritual duties to become his preoccupation and source of spiritual pride. In so doing, he turns his back to our high and holy standing in Christ. Yes, we continue to work hard at obeying God's Word. We read our Bibles. We pray. We memorize Scripture. Scripture reveals many things we should do, which both please God and bring blessing in our lives. However, not one of these good spiritual activities adds to our standing before God. These activities will never make us "more saved" or "more loved" by God than the day we were saved.

The Subtle Trap of Legalism

The spiritual journey of a legalist can be a joyless, busy, and frustrating experience. Consider the experience of Bill; although this is not his real name, his experience is very real. Bill is a brand-new believer who has a genuine love for Christ and is eager to learn as much as he can about the Christian life. One day as he is reading his Bible, a friend named Mike notices he is jumping from passage to passage in his reading. Mike asks what book of the Bible he is reading. Bill replies, "There is so much in the Bible, I like to read a little from different places." Mike raises his eyebrows. "You're reading the Bible at random? That's really not the best way. You need to read the Bible seriously. Listen, I have this daily reading schedule that tells you how to read through the whole Bible in a year, a little every day. I'll make you a copy." "Wow!" replies Bill. "I'd love to read the Bible through in a whole year."

Now fast forward about six months. Bill is much, much busier than ever before in his life. After Mike told him about Bible reading, he encouraged Bill to meditate on Scripture. A few days later, another Christian told him how important it was to attend an early morning men's study group. Then Bill attended a conference on evangelism. He learned that he needed to be witnessing as often as he could. Soon after that, he heard on a Christian radio program about fasting. One by one, Bill added more and more spiritual activities to his life. Each was good, yet without realizing it, a dangerous shift was beginning to take place in his heart and mind. What God had intended as a means for experiencing spiritual growth, Bill had changed into a means of earning favor and approval from God. The joy he once had began to disappear like air from a deflating balloon. He began to dress like the Christians in his men's study circle. He now used the same Bible as they did. He developed a spiritual pride in his Christian life. He began thinking that he was now a better Christian in God's sight, that God loved him more, and he slowly began to look down on other Christians who were not doing as much as he was.

"What is legalism? It is the wrong attitude towards the code of laws under which a person lives...the goal is to exalt self and gain merit rather than glorify God."

Charles C. Ryrie
(1925 - present)
Former Professor at Dallas
Theological Seminary



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However, Bill noticed something else in his life. When he was faithful in all his activities, there was more joy and confidence in his spiritual life. But when he failed in a number of the activities—when he didn't read his Bible as much or when he missed a few meetings because he was tired from work—then his joy and zeal for God languished. Bill became hesitant in his approach to God in prayer. He began to feel that God did not approve of him, because his performance has not been so great lately. Unknowingly Bill had fallen into the subtle trap of legalism. Bill was measuring where he stood with God by his spiritual effort. However, in reality Bill's standing in Christ, access into His holy presence, and the love of God for him are as sure and certain as God Himself.

Conclusion

Legalism is the lie that says God's pleasure and joy in me is dependent upon what I do. It is legalism that causes a missionary in Africa to think God is more pleased with him than He is with the devoted Christian businessman in America. And it is legalism that causes the preacher behind the pulpit to think God is more pleased with him than He is with the tattooed Christian military veteran sitting in the back row. Legalism is the deception that God will find more pleasure in me because my devotion is greater than that of others. Legalism causes the heart to forget that God sings over us because of the work He has done, not because of what we have done (Zeph. 3:15-17). Believers equally bring pleasure to God because the pleasure He receives in us is the purchased pleasure of the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. Any imagined superiority to other Christians is the sure sign of the legalist. Legalism assumes that in some way our soiled self-effort can improve our position in Christ. Let us not forget the simple truth of the New Testament that all believers are "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:5).

Endnotes

1. C. H. Mackintosh, *Short Papers vol. 1*, (Sunbury, PA: Believers Bookshelf, 1975), p. 77
2. Ray Stedmen, further documentation is unavailable.