

Legalism: The Enemy of Grace

In the New Testament, we see that those who misused the law at the expense of grace drew Jesus' and the Apostle Paul's harshest criticisms (Matt. 23:13-28; Mark 7:9-13; Gal. 1:8-9; 5:12). Legalism is an attitude antithetical to grace. Christians need to understand what legalism is, what forms it takes, and what consequences it brings so that they will not be ensnared by it.

The definition of legalism

Legalism is not a biblical word, but it can be defined by the implications of Scripture. It is not keeping or obeying commands, which are found in both the Old and New Testaments. *Legalism is keeping the law, commands, rules, or any code of conduct in the power of the flesh to gain approval with God or people with an attitude that exalts oneself.* Legalism focuses on outward conduct at the expense of cultivating the inner experience of God's love and grace. Law-keeping is antithetical to enjoying the free gift of God's grace and walking in the Spirit. The Scripture is clear that Christians are not under law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14). The law was not given as a means to *earn* God's love, but as a means to *experience* God's love.

The forms of legalism

Legalism takes several forms.

- 1) **Justification legalism** adds law-keeping or performance to earn salvation. It contradicts salvation by grace through faith (John 6:27-29; Acts 15:1-5; Rom. 3:20-24; Gal. 2:16; 3:1-3).
- 2) **Sanctification legalism** attempts to achieve holiness by keeping laws, rules, rituals, or disciplines (Gal. 3:1-3) instead of allowing Jesus Christ to live out His life through us (Gal. 2:20) and walking in His Spirit (Gal. 5:16-18).
- 3) **Religious legalism** elevates non-biblical standards, traditions, or cultural preferences over the clear commands of Scripture (Mark 7:6-9; Col. 2:20-23).
- 4) **Theological legalism** equates correct doctrine with righteousness before God—being right about God is being right with God. Doctrinal orthodoxy is more important than Christlike love and faith in action (Matt. 23:23; James 2:14-26). Doctrine is weaponized such that fellowship can be broken even over secondary, less important doctrines.

The consequences of legalism

Legalism produces nothing good. It may shape one's outward conduct, but it does not transform the heart toward Christlikeness. These are some of the negative consequences of legalism:

- 1) Justification legalism prohibits salvation and promotes a perverted gospel of works that will keep others unsaved (Rom. 3: 20).
- 2) Any form of legalism will cause a lack of full assurance of salvation because one's performance will never be perfect or achieve the righteousness of God.

Number 108

- 3) Sanctification legalism defines spirituality by what we do or don't do while it neglects the life of Christ living through us. It manifests a "form of godliness" without the inner reality (2 Tim. 3:5).
- 4) Spiritual bondage results from laboring to keep laws and rules that can never be fully satisfied (Acts 15:10-11; Gal. 5:1).
- 5) Since the law makes us conscious of sin and brings condemnation (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:10), legalists are prone to guilt, misery, depression, burnout, and even dropping out from the futility of trying to keep rules but continually failing.
- 6) Pride comes from glorying in one's accomplishments instead of glorying in Christ's accomplishments. Christ's righteousness is minimized in favor of self-righteousness (Luke 18:9-14; Gal. 2:21; 6:13-15; Phil. 3:7-9).
- 7) The legalist often has a judgmental spirit towards others who do not perform up to the legalist's expectations or scruples (Luke 18:9-14; Rom. 14:1-13; Col. 2:16-23).
- 8) The legalist is easily motivated toward good conduct by fear of failing to live up to the law or by guilt for not having lived up to the law. They often live a *have-to* life instead of a *want-to* life that responds gratefully and lovingly to God for His grace (Rom. 12:1; John 14:15).
- 9) Law-keeping in the flesh does not produce the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-23) or access the other blessings of Christ's grace which come through faith (Rom. 5:2; Gal. 5:4).
- 10) Legalism kills a sincere and loving spirit in a church (Gal. 5:14, 25-26) and instead encourages hypocrisy.

The alternative to legalism

If legalism is highly regulated conduct, license is the absence of restraints on behavior. *The biblical way is to live in liberty restricted by love for God and others.* When Christians love God and others, they will fulfill the righteous requirements of the law (Gal. 5:13-14). The priority of love is called the "first and great commandment," the "law of Christ," the "royal law," and a "new command" (Matt. 22:37-40; John 13:34-35; Gal. 6:2; James 2:8). Living under grace accepts Jesus Christ's righteousness because He fulfilled the law for us. Under grace, believers are free from the fear and pressure of performance because God accepts them on the basis of who they are in Christ, not what they do. Believers are free to walk in the Spirit through faith, which produces Christlikeness.

Conclusion

As Christians we must learn to recognize legalism, avoid it, and flee from it. We must never surrender to the demands of legalists which will return us to the bondage of performance, continual failure, guilt, and eventual hypocrisy. As with our initial salvation, grace is the basis of the Christian life. Believers should grow in and stand strong in the grace that saves and sanctifies (Gal. 5:1; 2 Tim. 2:1; 2 Peter 3:18). *"If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit"* (Gal. 5:25).

