***Beware the Legalists - PH65-02

Advanced Bible Doctrine - Philippians 3:1-2***

Please turn to Philippians 3:1-3 that takes up the subject of legalism. Paul is attacking a heresy which has been reoccurring from New Testament times to this very day. Thousands upon thousands of Christians are entrapped in legalism and don't know it, in part because most Christians don't really know what legalism is. However, the apostle Paul has described legalists in the harshest of terms. He has called them "dogs," and we have studied the doctrine of dogs, so you know how severe a term that was. He has called them "evil workers," and he has called them "mutilators of the body" because they made so much of circumcision as applying to the Christian.

So he warns Christians to be on guard against teachers of legalism. What he means, in fact, is when you find a legalist, whether he's a Sunday school teacher or a preacher in the pulpit or some well-meaning Christian, he means, "Avoid him, and have nothing to do with him." For that reason, he uses the strongest possible kind of language in describing his view of the legalists. Legalism is bad. The apostle does his best to help us to understand.

**Dispensations**

As we pointed out, legalism is a dispensational problem. The law era practices and principles are carried over to the church age, not realizing that there are certain things that were acceptable in God's way in the Old Testament which are not acceptable, nor His way, in the New Testament. You cannot bring the Mosaic Law system over into the grace era.

Some people today are determined legalists. They are deliberately legalists. They deliberately have holy days. They deliberately perform certain rituals by which they seek to gain God's favor. Other people are legalists without realizing it. They are not deliberate. Many of them have been led into that in their innocence by others in whom they have placed their confidence, not realizing that they have been led into legalism.

The legalist is usually selective. He doesn't want to do everything that was done in the Old Testament. He doesn't want to do any of the sacrifices or things like that, but he wants to do some of the other things.

The reason that Paul speaks so strongly against legalism is because legalism is destructive of the principle of grace, which is the only principle upon which God operates in this age. If you ever deviate from grace (and the Bible calls that "falling from grace"), then there is absolutely no hope for you to make progress in your spiritual life. You will be a zero for all the years of your walk on this earth. Finally, you will go to heaven, and when you stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ, you will discover that you're a pure Christian without any rewards because you spent your life in legalism. So legalism is a very serious heresy.

**Grace**

The Christian life from start to finish is grace. Grace and legalism are mutually exclusive. You cannot mix the two. The Bible makes it very clear that we are not under law and the legalistic system that it represented, but we are under grace and the freedoms that that represents.

However, having said all that, let me define a little more clearly what we mean by living under grace. Immediately that we have made that distinction between law and grace, there are always people who throw up their hands and say, "Oh, well, then you could live like the devil. You can do anything you want. That's terrible." No, you don't live like the devil. You don't do anything you want. The truth of the matter is that we, who live under grace, have certain commandments to fulfill just as the Jews did.

We know (because we can turn to the Old Testament and count them) that there were 613 rules for the Jews to keep. But the Christian also has hundreds and hundreds of legal acts, which he is obliged to keep. So let me make that clear:

**Positive Rules for Christians**

1. For example, the Bible says that a Christian has to be subject to his government (Romans 13:1).
2. The Bible says that a Christian must do everything decently and in order in the local church organization. A local church organization has to be decent, controlled, and orderly (1 Corinthians 14:40).
3. The Bible says that it is legal for a Christian to bear the burdens of another person (Galatians 6:2).
4. The Bible commands wives to be in subjection to their own husbands (Ephesians 5:22). That's a law.
5. Under grace, a Christian is commanded to control his mental attitude (Philippians 4:8).
6. A Christian under grace must control his speech (Colossians 4:6). That is not optional. You have to control your speech.
7. Under grace, the Christian is commanded to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17).
8. A Christian must perform divine good works (2 Thessalonians 3:13). The name of the game of the Christian life is good works, and you are commanded to be performing good works. There is no option there.
9. A Christian is commanded to maintain personal stability (Titus 2:2-6). You must be stable as a Christian. It is a sin to be unstable as a person if you are a believer.
10. You are commanded to follow the life patterns of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:21, 1 John 2:6). He is our example to follow. We are told to follow Him.
11. We are told as Christians to love one another–the "agape," mental attitude, with no bitterness love (John 15:12). You don't have any option. Now God never commands you to "phileo" other Christians because you may not be emotionally inclined to respond toward certain people. However, He can command you to have the mental "agape" quality love, and He does. You have no option but to have it, or else it's sin.
12. You are told to walk by means of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16). You are not to walk by means of human abilities. The Christian life is a life of God the Holy Spirit expressing Himself through this.
13. We are told to obey the pastor-teacher in the local church (Hebrews 13:7, Hebrews 13:17). You don't have an option. Once a pastor-teacher is recognized by the congregation as the authority in that church, then he is to be obeyed, and he is to be respected, for he exercises the teaching authority of God.

**Freedom Comes from God**

So here is a series (which could be multiplied many times) of specific things that Christians are told to do. However, we have negatives as well. As, you know, the Ten Commandments are basically negative, because they are basically telling the old sin nature what it must not do in order to preserve freedom. This is rather interesting that the Constitution of the United States does the same thing. The Constitution of the United States tells government what it must not do (negative things) in order that it does not restrict the freedoms of people. That is because freedom does not come from government.

One of the most clever things that was ever perpetrated upon humanity, back in the days after World War II, when the United Nations was formed, was that they had to figure out an opening paragraph to this document that they had put together for nations to be united and related with one another in peace and prosperity. Through American liberal influence, a very clever thing was done.

As every schoolboy and every schoolgirl sooner or later learns, the preamble to the Constitution says, "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, and to ensure," and so on. It began with, "We, the people of the United States." You notice that it didn't say, "We, the states of the American colonies." It said, "We the people." So through American liberal influence, the United Nations charter begins the same way: "We, the people of the world," (something like that), and then it goes on.

Well, the truth of the matter is that the United Nations is a document which views government as the source of human liberty and blessing. If you ever read through the charter of the United Nations, you would discover that every human liberty and privilege is restricted by, "As nations make laws concerning this right," or "As conformable to the laws of the nation concerning this right." All of a sudden you see this popping out again and again, and suddenly you realize here is a document that is telling us that God has not given us freedom as our Constitution tells us, but that governments give us freedom. Therefore, governments have the right to take freedom away. Government can take away anything it gives. But freedom does not come from governments. It comes from God.

So the sense of personal freedom and of liberty is something that we have to preserve by recognizing that it comes from the authority of God, not from the authority of man. So consequently, our Constitution says that governments can't do this, and governments can't do that. This is because history has proven that governments are the greatest danger to personal human freedom. So God, in His Word, in order to make us free (not to restrict us), has told us certain "Thou shall nots." The Ten Commandments do it; the American Constitution does it; and, the laws of grace do it.

**Negative Rules for Christians**

For example, here are certain acts that are illegal for a Christian:

1. Do not be patterned after this world (Romans 12:2). You do not cut your life to the pattern of Satan's world.
2. Do not be an idolater (1 Corinthians 10:7). That can be actually bowing down to an image, or it can be bowing down to a bank account–anything that takes love ahead of God in your life.
3. It says, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 4:30). That is, "Do not have known unconfessed in your life."
4. It says, "Do not provoke your children to wrath" (Colossians 3:21). A lot of juvenile delinquents are the direct products of parents who drove them to wrath by the things that the parents were doing.
5. "Do not quench the Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). It's illegal to quench the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. That is, to say, "No" to His guidance.
6. "Do not be ashamed of Jesus Christ" (2 Timothy 1:6).
7. "Do not fail to attend church services." Hebrews 10:25 says it's illegal not to attend church services. God says you don't have any options. You cannot stay home from church services.
8. It's illegal to speak evil of others, James 4:11 says, so don't do it.
9. It's illegal to return an evil act for an evil act (1 Peter 3:9). God says you must not return evil for evil. That's illegal for a Christian.
10. The Bible says it's illegal for a Christian to fellowship with someone who's teaching false doctrine. 2 John 10 and other verses in the Bible tell us specifically, "Don't even sit down and eat with a person if you know he teaches false doctrine, and he bears any influence." You do not have fellowship with people like that.

So I think as you would read through the Word of God and start thinking about this, you will discover that living under grace means that you obey certain laws of the dispensation of grace. Some of these are positive laws. Some of these are negative laws. But they are rules. They are laws. We have hundreds of them in the Bible directed to Christians. For that reason, as we've already pointed out, James 1:25 calls the laws of grace the perfect law of liberty. James 2:8 calls it the royal law. Galatians 6:2 calls it the law of Christ. Romans 8:2 calls it the law of the Spirit of life. Each of these are specifically referring to the teachings of grace as a law.

So we've got it established, I trust, that the Bible does have rules that Christians are to keep–positive and negative. I know there are always some people that get up in arms over this, and it upsets them tremendously to think that Christianity means rules. Christianity means some things you must do, and some things you must not do.

**Legalism**

So what do we mean when we talk about legalism? What is the practice of legalism? Up to now, in the eyes and minds of most people, legalism usually seems to mean that you cannot have any rules. You cannot have any regulations–things you must do, or you must not do. Is that legalism? Well, legalism, first of all, is not a Bible word. Legalism is, however, a biblical concept. Legalism is not simply the presence and the obedience of laws or commandments of God. Just because you keep these rules of grace does not make you a legalist. Just because you do not violate certain rules of grace does not make you a legalist. That's what we want to establish, first of all. Both legalists and non-legalists have laws which they obey–very often, the same laws. You can be a legalist in obeying the law of God, or you can be a non-legalist while obeying the same law from God.

So here in Philippians 3, where Paul opposes legalism so vehemently, and calls them dogs, evils workers, and butchers, he is not opposing the keeping of the commandments of God. Let's understand that. That is not legalism to keep God's rules. Legalism is not even the imposition of rules on other people. Very frequently, if somebody comes and says, "Well, here's something that you must do," people think that that's legalism. I remember a lady saying one time, "Well you just make me feel like it has to be this way, and I have to do it this way." And I said to her, "If you feel that way, it isn't because I'm insisting you do that. It's because God is insisting you do that." So legalism is not even the imposition of laws or rules on someone else.

These limitations, as a matter of fact, as we pointed out, are essential to freedom. God gives freedom. Then God tells us what we must do and what we must not do in order to preserve freedom. That's why he gave the Ten Commandments to the Jews when they came out of slavery in Egypt. As soon as they were out, he said, "Now, the first thing I have to tell you is how to preserve your new freedom." There are ten basic principles which will preserve freedom for you. History has demonstrated that any nation which deviates from those ten basic principles loses its freedom. So limitations preserve freedom.

The imposition of laws is not legalism. So when you parents tell your children what to do, don't let your kids call you a legalist. You're not. When the government tells you something to do as a citizen, don't say that the government is being legalistic. There are a lot of things you could call the government, but the government has the right to pass laws and to tell you to do certain things or not to do certain things. When church leaders give you directions within the context of the authority that the congregation has delegated to them, don't say they're being legalistic because they're imposing rules in their administration on the operation of that local church. That's not legalism.

When a teacher or a principal at school tells the pupils to do something, that's not being legalistic. That's limiting expression and activity for preserving freedom. When an employer tells his employer what to do, don't call your employer a legalist because he's telling you what to do and he's imposing his rules on you. So having to do something is not legalism.

So what is legalism? Legalism is a mental attitude toward laws. It is a mental attitude that seeks to accomplish something of personal benefit for yourself through the rule. If you perform the rule, you expect to gain a personal benefit. That is legalism. The code of laws or the rules may be of divine or they may be of human origin. The rules may be good rules or they may be bad rules, but when you obey this code of law, that does not automatically make you a legalist. Legalism is not even to be equated with the Mosaic Law as such. Sometimes we do this, and that's not quite right. The Mosaic Law was not legalistic as such. It's the attitude which obeys these laws, good or bad, for the purpose of self-exaltation.

That self-exaltation may be to secure salvation. Certain people go through certain religious rituals in order to secure salvation. Some of them use water baptism; some of them use church membership; and, some of them use certain religious observances such as Lent and Christmas, and so on. All of these are legalisms. Why? Because they are following certain rules with the motivation of gaining points with God. Are you doing something in order to gain favor with God?

For example, you may have believed that stupid remark that if you don't give an offering of the money which God has given you (which you should give, and which God intends for you to give), He's going to cause someone to run into your car, and He's going to take the offering out on your fenders. So you think to yourself and you say, "Oh, I don't want that to happen to my nice new car that I just brought last week. I don't want that to happen. I'd better give an offering." You are a legalist. You gave an offering in order to get God's favor–to preserve you from something you didn't want happening to you.

I've had parents who have wanted to teach their children to pray before they eat. As children sat down and they jumped in, and started eating, I've heard parents say, "If you don't pray, God may make you choke on that food." Then you see their little eyes get big: "Thank you, Lord." Now, that is legalism to the core. This kid is praying so he won't choke on his banana. You multiply it out to yourself. That is legalism–when I'm keeping a rule because I want to gain points with God. I'm going to gain favor with God. I'm going to gain blessing from God.

In the age of grace, that is as gross as it was in the age of the law. Even under the Mosaic Law, that wasn't the reason the rules were given. The rules weren't given so you could have God's favor. Now, you are required to keep the rules, but the rules were to be kept with a certain spirit of mind (an attitude of mind, and an attitude of soul). But they were not given simply because you were going to gain God's favor in this way.

This self-exaltation in the life of a Christian (the keeping of rules for personal self-exaltation) is expressed in seeking sanctification. Some people think that they will become good Christians by keeping certain rules, and have God's blessing upon them. So they come up with a list of taboos–things that you do, and things that you don't do, all of which are geared to gain God's favor upon you, and to keep God's wrath away from you.

So the legalist is one who seeks to gain merit and favor with God by means of keeping a set of rules, or by certain conduct which he restricts himself to. When Lent comes along just before Easter time, you'll hear a lot about self-denial. So for 40 days preceding Easter, people will be giving up things. Some people will quit smoking for 40 days. Some people will quit drinking for 40 days. I notice that usually they quit doing something bad so that, at least, they have a motivation that God is going to be so pleased. So here they are. This human being in the age of grace quits smoking for 40 days, and they can just see God looking down and saying, "Oh, wonderful, wonderful. I'm so pleased with you. Come up two steps higher, and have an extra $5 in your pay? You're so wonderful." Come the end of 40 days Lent, they're back to the old weed. They think, "Well, what difference does it make?" You've already got a $5 increase in your salary. You can afford it. So there's no end to this inanity. This, "I'm going to please God by things that I do. I'm going to gain this favor. I'm going to gain His points." Now, that's legalism.

If you can get hold of understanding that, then you'll get a little better understanding of why Paul used such strong language, because all the while that you are doing that to gain God's blessing and favor, you are losing it. That's the viciousness of legalism. Legalism is a loss of liberty and freedom as a Christian. That's why the book of Galatians is so harsh, because those legalists who had followed Paul had robbed the Galatian believers of all of their freedom; all of their blessings; and, all of the very things they were looking for from God. Legalism was denying it to them. It is one of the worst heresies of our day.

Yet, it is widely practiced everywhere. How many churches can you go into where you do not hear some preacher getting up sooner or later and hacking away at every believer being a tither, and feeling that he is serving God in such a wonderful way by teaching people to be tithers? Now there is nothing wrong with tithing. It's probably a pretty good place to begin in your giving, and to go up from there. But if you do it under the concept that God has imposed this rule upon you, then you are a legalist, because you think that if you do it (and that's generally how it's presented), if you give 10% of your money, God will prosper you.

Have you ever had an occasion to sit in one of these Christian businessmen meetings? And they have somebody who has made it really big, and he'll get up and say, "I was a failure in business. Things were going bad. I got down to my last $10. So I said to myself, 'I've got to make a new beginning with God.' So I went to the Lord and I said, 'Father, if you will prosper me in my business, I promise you that I'll give You 10%, the first thing off the top, out of everything I make.' Then from that day, my business prospered. Here I am. I drive around in Cadillacs, and I fly around in 727s, and I just go all over the world in my yachts. God has prospered me. I have had to build more vaults. Every closet that I walk into in my house, the money just falls off the shelves. I can't find any place to keep it. And it's all because I tithe. Men, start tithing."

Now suppose there's a poor businessman who's trying to eke it out, sitting there listening to this, and he doesn't have any doctrine. So he gets this human viewpoint, and what does he want to do? He wants to be prosperous. So the first thing he does is he thinks, "So that's how you do it? I fork over 10%, and then God blesses me. I'll do it." The man has been led into legalism in his giving. Do you know the worst thing about? All the tithe that he gives will receive no reward in heaven. That's the viciousness of legalism. Because he gave it under the principle of legalism rather than the principles of grace giving, all that he gives is wasted. He will get no reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ for that money, though God may use that money (and He will) in His work. But that person, because he did it in the wrong way, receives no reward for it. That is kind of an example of legalism that is multiplied any number of ways–seeking to gain God's favor and merit by something you do or a rule you keep.

The proper motivation is not your self-exaltation and not your self-prospering. The proper motivation in obeying God's laws is the Lord's glory, not our own glory. The power in legalism is the old sin nature–the determination of your own self-will. But the power in grace is God the Holy Spirit, and it's a whole different ballgame.

So under the Old Testament law, the Jew had a code of 613 laws that he had to obey. The legalistic Jew, under the law, obeyed these Mosaic Laws in order to gain God's favor. He was looking for self-exaltation. We have a beautiful example of this in Luke 18, where a man was obeying one of the Mosaic rules, but he was doing it in such a way that he was a legalist, and thus was not under the blessing of God. In Luke 18:10-12, we read, "Two men went up into the temple to pray–the one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. The Pharisees stood and prayed, thus with himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not as other men are: extortioners; unjust; adulterers; or, even as this tax collector. I fast twice in the week, and I give tithes of all that I possess.'"

Now you can just read those verses and see that those verses just reek with legalism. This man was complimenting himself before God, and the reason he was doing it was to establish with God that he deserved God's blessing and favor. He fasted; he tithed; and, he kept the rules. Well, God takes no pleasure in legalists who perform the ritual for the merit without the right attitude. God is not at all interested in legalists who seek merit.

In Isaiah 1:11, the prophet declares that principle to us in a distinctive and definitive way, speaking for God: "'To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me,' saith the Lord, 'I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts, and I delight not in the blood of bullocks or of lambs, or of he goats. When you come to appear before Me, who has required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations, incenses, and abomination unto Me. The new moons and the Sabbath (the holy days), the calling of assemblies, I cannot bear. It is iniquity, even the solemn meeting.'"

Did you notice what he said? He just named a series of rules here that God has imposed upon the Jewish people–holy days and these days, and He says they're iniquities. Your observance of those things is sin. "But God, you told us to remember these days. You tell us to observe these rituals." He says, "It's a sin which you're doing." How can that be? The attitude of mind with which these things are done is what Isaiah was referring to.

Verse 14: "Your new moons and your appointed feasts My Soul hates." Why? Because it is done to gain God's favor. It is not done in the spirit of glorifying God and seeking His exaltation. "They are a trouble unto Me. I'm weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands," and now notice that all of this was done and all of these rules were kept for the ultimate purpose of being able to lift the hands in prayer to God and speak to Him. "When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Yea, when you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood."

Now that is strong declaration of how much God hates legalism. Yet, Christians are just satiated with legalism to the ends of their brain cells. They have never been warned about it. They generally don't understand what it is. They think it's obeying rules or not doing certain things, not realizing that it's the mental attitude with which you obey rules. It's the mental attitude with which you do or don't do something that constitutes legalism.

So the non-legalistic Jew under the law did have to obey the Mosaic Laws, but he didn't obey it to earn merit before God. He was non-legalistic because he was not seeking to gain merit before God. Living under grace means to practice the positive and the negative laws of Christianity. Because you obey those laws, that does not make you a legalist. Obeying the New Testament laws can be, and is, an expression of positive volition to Bible doctrine, not legalism. We have learned many things in the form of doctrinal principles. If you obey those because they are doctrine (God has commanded them, and it is to His glory that we obey them), they will prosper you and bless you. If you obey them because you think you're going to gain God's favor, then they will not prosper you.

Obeying the New Testament laws can also be legalistic, even though it is right and legal to do them. You may obey these laws in order to get something from God. Refusing to obey the laws of the New Testament under the claims of the liberty of grace is a legalism in itself. A lot of people do that. They exalt themselves and say, "I'm free. I'm not under law. I don't have to obey any rules." But a Christian's liberty is freedom from the slave market of sin–freedom to practice righteousness (Romans 6:22, 2 Peter 2:19). Our freedom is freedom from being a slave to sin. Therefore, it is freedom to do the thing that God calls upon us to do.

So a Christian who is in a position to be free can actually be guilty and enslaved to legalism. This can be doing the right thing for the wrong reason, or rejecting the legitimate exercise of authority in some realm over you because you have the concept that that infringes upon your freedom. Liberty is always governed by laws. Otherwise, the old sin nature goes to anarchy, as Galatians 5:13 tells us. Freedom comes to us from God. No government and no person has the right to deny that freedom to you. But when you are given rules and directions to obey by God or by His legitimate authorities, it is not legalistic to obey and to respond to those. But any improper restriction upon a Christian's freedom is a restriction of his blessings, and that's legalism.

So don't let people put their human traditions on you. You may follow these human traditions, and that's legalism. I remember one time when I was a little boy, and I attended a very large church in Chicago. We had been to church one day, and it was a very cold day. I must have been a fifth- or sixth-grader. I remember coming out of church, and we were standing out in front. They had a kind of a concrete railing. It was a cold, windy Chicago day, and I sat down on the railing and I felt, "Oh, that's cold." So I took my Bible and put it there and I sat down on it, so it wouldn't be so cold. A lady came out of church and saw me sitting on my Bible. She had a fit: "You're sitting on the Word of God? What kind of a boy are you?" That scared me to death. I'm afraid to touch a Bible to this day. Now, that was legalism. To her, this book was sacred, and I was using it to warm myself, as a matter of speaking. To her it was a terrific shock that I was sitting on the Bible, a sacred book. That's legalism.

Those are the kinds of human traditions you can have imposed upon you until it will run you up the wall–all of the taboos. You know them. I don't have to repeat them to you. They are commonly imposed upon believers under the guise that if you do this, or if you don't do this, God is going to be so pleased with you.

Many times, the taboos have a good point. They are bad things that we shouldn't do. But they are bad things which we should not do for a good reason–our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit; God has condemned this; this is a bad testimony; or, something of that nature. There is a right motivation to the Lord's glory and to His exaltation. We should not accept the taboo because of self-exaltation; that is, that it's going to gain some merit or some standing in God's eyes for me. So any improper restriction on liberty is a legalism to the core.

Legalism is human viewpoint. You'll find it expressed in false concepts of Christian giving. You'll find legalism as human viewpoint expressed as false restrictions on how you use Sunday. You find legalism as human viewpoint expressed in false merit in not doing certain things. You'll find it in false esteem for religious rituals, holy days, and holy places. You will find it in false labeling of inventions and products as evil. Has anybody ever told you that movies were evil? Movies are not evil. Movie makers are evil. Has anybody ever told you that television was evil? I know some very real devoted, dedicated Christians today who won't have a television set in their house because it's evil. Television is not evil. Television producers are evil and program planners are evil. But television is not evil.

Has anybody ever told you that cosmetics was evil? I remember one of my best sermons when I was a teenager. It was about how Jezebel painted her face. I used to knock them in the aisles with that one. After I got through being a teenager, I got a few more pieces together and realized that that little bit of taboo wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. That is legalism, because somebody comes along with the goofy notion that if you go around looking like Hamlet's ghost, God will be so pleased with you, and people will be running to the Lord in droves because they see your pallid face.

What about jewelry? Has anybody ever told you that jewelry was evil; food was evil; entertainment was evil; or, craftsmen were evil. There's no end to the inanities of legalism. I am always amazed. I'm fascinated by how preachers can get away with so much murder on this subject. I don't know really how they do it. They really are brilliant, for people not to suspect that something must be wrong.

Rules that men make are opinions of men. These are not necessarily, therefore, things that we have to keep. We may have some opinions on how ladies should dress, but that's a matter of judgment and taste. It's not a matter of some rule that God is going to be pleased with you and bring merit to you, providing you obey it.

Another legalism in human viewpoint is expressed in the course of a false pursuit of self-denial and self-crucifixion. You may have heard somebody say, "Well, I'm having a lot of trouble in my life. I'm just going to have to put myself on a real course of self-crucifixion and self-denial. This again, is doing what? If I do this, then God will be pleased with me. Now this is as old as the human race. How often have men like Martin Luther, in their struggle to find God, abused their bodies, and practically killed themselves in order to deny themselves in order that they could gain God's favor? You will never gain this in all the world.

**Freedom**

So you and I, in grace, are free. We are free to express righteousness that we have been called to. We have the capacity to be righteous through God the Holy Spirit who lives within us. We have the capacity to express that righteousness in obedience to certain rules, positive and negative, for the Lord's glory.

**How to Avoid Being a Legalist**

So here are the guidelines for a conduct free of legalism. Here is how you would avoid being a legalist:

1. Use the things of this world but do not abuse them. The principle is stated in 1 Corinthians 7:31. Everything in this world that God has given us is a thing that we have a legitimate right to use. Use the things of this world, but do not abuse them–don't go to excess. Enjoy good food, but don't go to excess. Don't abuse it.
2. Enjoy the things of the world, but do not love the world's system (1 Timothy 6:17, 1 John 2:15). So if God prospers you, and he gives you a new car, please don't drive on the church parking lot with your nice new car and say, "I was just walking down the street, and saw this used car lot, and this fella came out, and he just made me such an offer that it was absolutely unbelievable. Of course, I didn't want a new car, but I just couldn't turn it down. I felt this was from the Lord." You don't have to explain to us. Just go ahead and enjoy your car. Don't buy yourself a new car and come and say, "I'm doing this for my business. The Lord wants me to do this so I can make more money to give to His work." You don't have to explain to us why you've got a new car. If God has prospered you, and you can buy a new car, then enjoy it. That's the biblical principle. If you come around and explain to us, in some little sneaky way, to justify yourself in what you've brought, you're a legalist. And right there with your new car, you have used that to put a sin against your record that needs confessing then. Enjoy the things of the world, but don't love the world's system. Just don't love the systems of the world. All of those are sources of evil. But the things of the world that God gives you, enjoy them.
3. Do not hinder the development of the spiritual maturity structure in another believer (1 Corinthians 8:13). You and I are forbidden to hinder the spiritual development of another person. When we impose legalism upon him, and when we impose our views upon him–and our taboos and our preferences, then we have hindered his spiritual development. There are people who don't think you should do certain things on Sunday like watching football games; playing baseball; playing tennis; or, something like that. I've noticed very frequently that they are usually people who don't like to watch football games; play baseball; play tennis; or, anything like that. So they don't mind making that a rule, but they don't make rules against the things that they like to do on Sunday. You watch that. A legalist may say, "Oh, this is Sunday, a holy day. There are certain things you can't do." Don't hinder the spiritual maturity development of some believer with your kooky notions.
4. Do it all to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, "Whatever you do (whatever you eat; whatever you say; or, whatever you do), do it all unto the Lord's glory." If you follow that principle, then you'll never fall into the trap of trying to gain merit with God by something you do. You will already recognize that you have all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus, and that you are already completely 100% in God's favor. God is just sitting up in heaven, tapping his foot, waiting to give you anything that His plan has set aside for you to have. When you're ready to take it: the greatest blessings; the greatest financing; the greatest happiness; and, every provision, it's all yours. You don't have to go through legalisms to get them. If you do, you will lose what He has reserved for you. What God would have done for you, your legalism will keep Him from doing.

Legalism is not keeping rules. Legalism is not imposing rules on other people. But legalism is keeping legitimate rules for a wrong reason in order to gain merit and favor with God. God says, "I hate it, and I'll have nothing to do with it. I call upon you as My children not to have anything to do with legalism. Do not insult Me by trying to gain My favor through accomplishments of your old sin nature.

Dr. John E. Danish, 1973

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