
Legalism ¹

Introduction

God's plan is a Grace plan. God the Father does the work, man receives the benefit. God receives the glory for His own works; man receives no glory.

The greatest distortion to Grace is religious legalism!

Religion and Legalism are Satan's Ace and King of trump, the primary means by which he "blinds the minds of those who seek Christ" and which are included in Eph. 4:14 as part of "...every wind of doctrine, sleight of men, cunning craftiness, by which they lie in wait to deceive." By these means, Satan tries to disrupt the plan of God and blind people to Grace principles.

I use the word "religion" in a strict sense here, not in the general sense of "the service or worship of God." In the general sense, of course, Christianity could be viewed as a religion. But most religion is legalistic, and I want to distinguish the Christian way of life from other religious practice. So the definition I use is:

Religion is any system in which man by his own efforts tries to earn the approval of God.

Furthermore, the definition for legalism in this paper has to do only with religious legalism, so:

Legalism is a religious system that teaches that a person can do something to earn or merit salvation or blessing from God.

The purpose of this article is to help you identify religious legalism in all of its forms. The article will define and illustrate the concept of legalism, and show you how to distinguish legalism from Grace thinking and activities. There are also numerous references to Bible teaching on legalism, particularly from the Epistle to the Galatians, where the Jews had a very difficult time reconciling Law and Grace.

It is very important that you understand the doctrine of Grace also. Grace is an extensive Bible category. The majority of the blessings and privileges of the Christian life depend on knowing and using Grace principles. So it's vital that you master the subject.

To understand these concepts clearly, you should also study some of the other topics which are related to legalism, especially Grace.

Some categorical studies which you can request from Grace Notes are: The Barrier; Circumcision; Confession of Sin; Grace; Judgment, Justice, and Judging; Satan; Spirituality.

Defining Legalism

The standard (Webster's New Collegiate) definition for legalism is: strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral Code.

This definition does not seem very clear. What is, after all, "excessive" conformity to the law? I suppose it would be excessive to insist on driving 55 mph on the Interstate when people are stacked up behind you wanting to go 70. Legalism on the highway is sometimes dangerous.

But, strict obedience to God's laws is not wrong. In fact, failure to obey is sin. Also, you can certainly decide to set a high standard for yourself in some area, based on your understanding of the obligations of the Christian life. This is not wrong, and it is not legalism (by our previous definition of religious legalism), even though it might be strict conformance. (It is legalism, however, to think that by maintaining high standards you are somehow doing something to merit salvation or to earn blessings or rewards.)

¹ Grace Notes is a ministry of Valley Vegas Church, Las Vegas, Nevada:

<https://valleyvegas.org>

For information about regular Bible studies, write to: Jon Carpenter, info@gracenotes.online

Web: <https://www.gracenotes.online>

For example, your view of the moral code of Rom. 14:21 may lead you to adopt abstinence from alcohol as a standard, out of your regard for weaker brethren who might be caused to stumble. This would certainly be a strict and legal conformity; but it's not legalism, because you are not trying to earn points with God by your actions. Someone else may consider this excessive, but it's none of their business. It is not wrong for you to set high standards for yourself, and neither is it religious legalism. In fact, quite often what a grace believer calls legalistic is really someone else's setting high standards for himself.

A stricter general definition of legalism is found in the Oxford English Dictionary: The principles of those who hold a theological position of adhering to the Law as opposed to the Gospel; the doctrine of Justification by Works, or teaching which savors of that doctrine.

Romans 4:4,5 states the case succinctly,

"Now to him that works is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt; but to him that works not, but believes on Him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

And Romans 11:6 is clear,

"And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work."

Our human system of work and reward is like this: I work for you and you pay me. This is obviously legitimate, it's the way commerce works under divine institutions and free enterprise.

But the religious legalist is convinced that God works by the same system - or at least he hopes so. He says: I work for God and God rewards me by saving me and blessing me in some way.

That's not how God operates. He has no need or desire for our works; in fact, our works are offensive to Him. **Isaiah 64:6**, "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags..." If I try to impress God with my works, He discards them as filthy rags.

That's why we say that religious legalism, which tries to promote a works approach to God, is a "system that teaches that a person can do something to earn or merit salvation or blessing from God."

The word "legalism" also refers to any merit system which operates by works, by which a person tries to please God, or to assist God, or to glorify God by human power.

Religious legalism also refers to any system of religious bondage imposed on someone by another individual, or by an organization, that attempts to make that person a practitioner of legalism. Bullying tactics are often used: "Unless you accept our point of view, you are not one of us!" Ostracism is a very powerful persuader of novice Christians.

So, while it is not legalism to have high standards, it is legalism to try to impose those standards on others as a system of salvation or spirituality.

The word "grace" is used in the Bible to refer to all that God is free to do for mankind because of the Work that has already been performed for us by the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross. Grace means that man has received from God that which he has not earned or deserved. Nothing that we are, and nothing that we can do, is enough to qualify us for anything that the Lord has to give us. In fact, our works cause us to be arrogant in the presence of God, something He will not tolerate.

Read Romans 2:17-23, A Portrait of a Boaster

Read Romans 4:1-6, "But Not Before God..."

Systems of Legalism

There are four principal spiritual transactions in which Works are not accepted by God: Salvation, Spirituality, Maturity, and Reward.

Legalism in Salvation

There are many religious systems which teach salvation by works, or which try to mix works with faith, such as:

Believe + keep the Law of Moses

Believe + be circumcised

Believe + water baptism

Believe + confess your sins

Believe + give up your bad habits and fully surrender

Believe + make a public display or have great sorrow or a show of tears

Believe + church membership

But the Gospel is Believe plus Nothing!

Legalism in Christian Living

Here are some types of religious legalism imposed on Christians:

Taboos: thinking one is spiritual because he abstains from certain things or follows a certain system of do's and don'ts.

Imitating Personalities: the idea that living the Christian life is conformity in dress, mannerisms, speech, etc., with those who seem spiritual.

Relative Righteousness: "your sins are worse than mine, therefore I am more spiritual" or "I am spiritual and you are carnal."

Ecstatics: spirituality by speaking in tongues, groaning, getting in a trance, fainting.

Asceticism: spirituality by self-sacrifice or extreme self denial; giving up normal activities or even necessities in the mistaken notion that God is impressed.

Ritual: idea that one is spiritual because he goes through various forms of ceremony or ritual. In the Apostle's day, the Jews promoted circumcision as necessary to the Christian walk. These days, baptism or one of the other sacraments is promoted as being necessary to salvation.

Confusing Means with Results: the idea that you are spiritual if you are faithful in praying, giving, witnessing, attending church, and so forth. But - these legitimate activities are a result of Christian growth and the filling of the Holy Spirit. They are not the means for spirituality or growth in Christ. It is important to distinguish this difference.

The Grace principle is this: when you are in fellowship, occupied with Christ, and controlled by the Holy Spirit, all of your activities bring eternal reward (gold, silver, precious stones). You are producing divine good, and the spiritual power for your efforts comes from God as a grace provision.

When you are out of fellowship (sin not confessed), you are occupied with yourself, you control yourself, everything is chaos. Even with your good works you are only producing human good (wood, hay, and stubble). There is no spiritual power supporting your efforts, and there is no reward for them in heaven.

Obedience to God's Word is not legalism. Remember the definition. Everything you do has the potential for reward in heaven, under the right circumstances.

But the legalist thinks that the good works he does for God will not only keep him in fellowship and walking with the Lord but will also make him more spiritual and a great Christian.

Characteristics of the Weaker Brother - Romans 14

[Please read Romans chapter 14 before going through the discussion in this section.]

Romans 14 has a splendid description of the characteristics of a legalistic person who is called the “weaker brother.” This is a great passage about how to think grace toward someone who does something obnoxious or “unspiritual”. Remember - we all have areas of weakness. You may be the stronger believer in some of your areas of strength, and a weaker brother in areas of weakness. The idea in both cases is to avoid legalism and judgmentalism.

The strong believer in Romans 14 is mature, oriented to grace and the plan of God, occupied with Christ, and operates in fellowship most of the time under the power of the Holy Spirit.

The weaker brother is disoriented to grace, especially in the area of spirituality, and practices one or more forms of legalism. He is not comfortable unless he is judging the stronger believer in some gray area of behavior. The weaker brother has one or more of the following characteristics:

The weaker brother is strong on scruples but not well informed about doctrine or divine viewpoint.

The weaker brother operations on criteria of feelings, emotions, traditions, experiences, background, instead of Bible truth.

The weaker brother operates in the energy of the flesh, producing human good (wood, hay, stubble) which he thinks is divine good (gold, silver, precious stones).

The weaker brother is proud and critical of the strong believer, always judging him.

The weaker brother sticks his nose into the affairs of others by gossiping, maligning, and judging.

The weaker brother likes to set up a mold and try to squeeze everyone into it, so he is a bully.

The weaker brother has a guilt complex, so he is emotionally unstable; he is sensitive and demands attention; he is full of self-pity and lusts for approbation in his sin nature.

The weaker brother is jealous of others and tries to discredit them; he nit-picks and condemns the activities and projects of others.

Note: the weaker brother is weak because he resists Grace doctrines. He can recover quickly by confessing sin, being controlled by the Holy Spirit, and pursuing a program of intake of Bible truth which will make him spiritually strong.

Illustration from Galatians

It is important that you read the entire Epistle to the Galatians prior to reading this outline review of legalism in the Galatian church. The sequence of events was:

1. The Galatian believers came under the influence of Judaistic legalism from the Circumcision crowd.
 2. They took themselves out from under the Grace principle and put themselves under the Law.
 3. They soon adopted a practice of observing the days, months, times, and years.
 4. This influenced their appreciation of their teacher and turned the Apostle Paul into an “enemy.”
 5. Their growth process was stopped and Christ was not “formed in them”, so they were not growing into maturity.
 6. As a result of slowed growth and the absence of maturity, bonafide production (by means of the filling of the Holy Spirit) was curtailed, and their only production was a false production expressed as lusts of the flesh.
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7. Along with this pseudo-production went many other factors:
 - The glory-seeking concept of 5:26
 - The practice of straightening everyone else out, 6:1
 - The concept of “weariness” with actual doctrinal spiritual production, 6:2-6
 - The program of “impressing others”, peers, subordinates, or superiors, 6:11-13
 - The idea that man gets the glory, God is left out, the antithesis of Grace, 6:14,15

The principles to be derived from the example of the Galatian church are listed below:

1. Legalism is a result of a process of turning away from the truth. It is therefore deliberate (volitional). People deliberately choose legalism.
 2. The type of legalism which a person follows is often be related to some kind of background exposure, practice, or principle. A person’s culture and upbringing will determine what type of religion he follows. Galatians deals with religious legalism which came out of Jewish law and practice.
 3. Legalism always has a pseudo-content, “another gospel of a different kind”. Galatians 1:6.
 4. Once legalism begins to operate in a believer’s life, he becomes suspicious of another person’s motives, methods, message. Galatians 1:10-12.
 5. A mature Christian who has been in a legalistic religion can spot legalism a mile off. Paul was at the top of Judaism before his conversion. Galatians 1:13,14.
 6. Legalism sometimes uses techniques of infiltration, or spying, to gather information, while operating under a cloak of respectability. The legalist will bide his time until it suits his purpose to act. Galatians 2:1-4.
 7. When legalists are met with truth, in terms of content and procedure, it crumbles and is unable to fulfill its objectives. Strong teaching keeps legalists from getting their campaigns launched. Galatians 2:5-9.
 8. When legalists lose a battle on one front, they will regroup and form another base of operations on another front. When legalists cannot get a grasp on a person when he is in the company of strong believers, they will concentrate on him when he is standing alone.
 9. Legalism is often seen in leadership before it is seen in the congregation. And when a leader gets involved in legalism, he influences others to go with him. This happens often when a project is going sour and the leader is desperate for support. Example: when there is financial trouble, there is a great temptation to get away from principles of grace giving.
 10. The content of legalism is often something that has a bonafide function in some other context. In the Galatian churches, legalism was a distortion of the Law. The Law has a real and bonafide function, “to bring us to Christ”, and legalism distorted it. Other examples: legalism takes the doctrine of Separation and makes it the doctrine of spirituality; it takes the doctrine of Baptism and makes it the doctrine of church membership.

The term “bondage” in Galatians 5:1 means “the slavery to the principles and ways of regular human living.” This is not the idea of degraded lasciviousness or debauchery. The Law was bonafide; circumcision was bonafide. But these were distorted by legalists to that they became the master of the person instead of his tools.
 11. The legalistic person has been “bewitched.” This terms means “to have evil brought upon you by vain praise.” Legalism appeals to a person’s lust for approbation and tries to drag him into legalism to satisfy it. Galatians 3:1-3.
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The person in legalism is described as “foolish”, meaning “not understanding.” Legalism is one of the greatest robbers of Christian benefits; it robs people of their understanding of the Word of God and all of the benefits of the Grace life.

12. The legalist does not learn from experience. He has great tenacity; and despite many failures and vain strivings, he still can't see his error. He sees his programs not working, so he has to go from one thing to the next, always looking for something better, never satisfied, and never satisfying others. Galatians 3:4.
13. The very thing that the legalist puts himself under is that which rises up to smite him. When a Christian puts himself under the taboos of others, he can't measure up. So he puts himself under a church organization, and he still can't measure up. The very system that he embraces proves him to be deficient by always presenting a moving target. Grace is the only system which does not magnify the believer's deficiencies.

Grace to you, and peace...
