

LEGALISM VERSUS GRACE

by Jeff Rath 9-98

Legalism in this day and time can come in many forms: some people still try to do the Old Testament law, some people invent new rules and require people to follow them, and others mix the Old Testament law with new rules, and mix in New Testament doctrine. This can get very confusing because they can quote (or misquote) scriptures to back up their legalism. Legalism can be very mean, even vicious. Legalists will require that people obey their doctrine and tradition or they will be anathematized, excommunicated, and kicked out. Legalists seldom miss a chance to reprove others, but they usually walk by opportunities to be compassionate to others. Legalists think that they are better than others who don't do the works of their law. Legalists use God's Word to hurt other people. Legalism puts people in fear - either you obey their law or you suffer the consequences. Legalism is heavy and dark, and it takes all of the joy out of a Christian's life. Legalism is the doctrine and traditions of men taught as if they were the Word of God. Legalism is the strict adherence to a law without regard to the well-being and best interest of the people involved. Legalism tries to get the flesh to bring forth spiritual fruit by imposing rules and regulations.

Living Victoriously 1987 Victor Paul Wierwille

"A believer's peace is lost when he allows sincere, religious people to put him under the covenant of works of the Old Testament [legalism]. And when a believer loses sight of the truth of his standing in Christ then he loses sight of grace, mercy, love and the power of God. Then he gets into confusion as to the truth, and his peace evaporates, and it is gone."

Legalism destroys your peace, and it leads to confusion as to your state and standing with God. The sincere religious legalists love to tell people that they are unworthy and that God is displeased with them, or that God doesn't love them, or that God wants to punish them.

Galations 3:24 Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster *to bring us* unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

3:25 But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

The law was our schoolmaster until Christ, but after Christ came we are no longer under the law. Yet the legalists will continue to put people under the law and ignore what Jesus Christ has accomplished.

Take God at His Word 1987 Victor Paul Wierwille

"Christianity is not a religion. There is a lot of religion in so-called 'Christianity' today, but that is not God's fault. Religion is what man does; Christianity is what God wrought in Christ. Christianity is not a religion--it is The Way, The Truth, and The Life--it is what God wrought in Christ. It is a father and His family; God is our Father, and we are His children. That puts us in the household of God."

LEGALISM VERSUS GRACE

A lot of the religion that crept into Christianity is legalism. The legalists will tell you that only those who do the works of their law can be in the household of God. True Christianity is not legalistic.

The Church in History 1996 B.K. Kuiper

"No matter how hard he [Martin Luther] tried, never, it seemed to him, had he done enough to earn salvation. In a letter he wrote to the pope after his conversion he said: 'I often endured an agony so hellish in violence, that if those spells had lasted a minute longer I must have died then and there'."

Martin Luther tried legalism; he pursued it passionately, but he finally came to the Word of God where he learned that man could not be justified by any works of religion, but that man was justified by believing and the grace of God. Martin Luther discovered that you can never do enough to earn salvation, and that legalism will make you miserable.

Rightly Dividing The Word 1920 Clarence Larkin

"THE LAW demands holiness"

"GRACE gives holiness"

"THE LAW says--Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them"

"GRACE says--Blessed is the man whose iniquities are forgiven, whose sin is covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute iniquity."

"THE LAW declares--That as many as have sinned in the Law, shall be judged by the law."

"GRACE declares--That there is no condemnation (Judgment for Sin) for those who are in Christ Jesus for they have passed from death unto life."

Another manifestation of legalism is that they require people to earn from God what they already have. In the Book of Acts the Apostle Paul would get the gentiles born again and walking in the grace of God, and then the legalistic Judeans would come and tell those gentiles that they could not be saved unless they were circumcised.

Acts 15:1 And certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, *and said*, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

The word "brethren tells" us that they were already in God's family, that they were saved; and yet the legalists were telling them that unless they endured a painful circumcision, they were not saved. Legalists here wrongly divide God's Word and use the Word against people.

Galations 5:2 Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.

5:3 For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.

LEGALISM VERSUS GRACE

Most legalists are smorgasbord legalists; that is to say, they pick and choose what laws they want to enforce. I challenge you to read the Old Testament and try to do the law: if you eat a cheeseburger, you break the law; if you miss the major judean festivals such as Passover, then you break the law; if you miss the sin offering, you break the law; and what about the Day of Atonement and the Year of Jubilee? There are hundreds of laws in the Old Testament; if someone wants to be a legalist, then he is a debtor to do them all.

Galations 5:4 Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.

Acts 15:10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke (the law) upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.

Galations 5:1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled in the yoke of bondage. [the law]

Legalists hate liberty - - because when people are free, they can't control them and coerce them into obeying their rules and regulations so that they can try to squeeze some spiritual fruit out of the flesh.

Colossians 2:20 Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments [elements] of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances,

2:21 (touch not; taste not; handle not;

2:22 which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men?

Here the apostle Paul is confronting legalistic logic (or illogic), and challenging believers not to follow commandments and doctrines of men. I remember talking with a young man recently and he was telling me about how what his group did not allow people to do was not as bad as what other groups did not allow their people to do gee, that is really comforting; his group's legalism was easier to take than somebody else's! Let's face it - - a little legalism is still legalism, and it is still wrong.

The Subtle Power Of Spiritual Abuse, 1991; David Johnson/Jeff VanVonderen

“The legalist will always want to see another punished, or made to perform as a compensation for weakness or sin.”

The Pharisees were legalists; they were a continual hindrance to those who tried to move the Word of God in the first century. They weren't satisfied with doing the Old Testament law; they made up more rules and regulations that went even beyond the law.

LEGALISM VERSUS GRACE

The New Manners And Customs Of Bible Times 1987 Ralph Gower

"Pharisees . . . Their name means 'those who separate themselves.' . . . They wanted to be legally pure, separate from any form of defilement. They believed that the difference between being 'clean' and 'unclean' depended upon that law. What was 'clean' was obedience to the law; what was 'unclean' was disobedience to the law. This position regarding the law created problems, however, for although there are 613 commandments in the Torah (the books of Moses), they are not always specific. If the Sabbath day is to be kept 'holy,' then exactly what may be done and what may not? There were lengthy discussions on such subjects as whether or not it was lawful (or unclean) to eat an egg laid on the Sabbath. The Pharisees developed a set of regulations designed to save people from breaking the law itself . . . the Pharisees had failed to understand what the law was all about . . . The Pharisees seem to have taken the law and changed it . . . into a great burden -- 'This is what you have got to do; if you fail, God will punish you' . . . It was so out of tune with what God intended that Jesus attacked it."

The Pharisees were legalists who wanted to be separate (sanctified) from all of what they considered unclean, but they defiled themselves with their traditions.

Matthew 15:3 But he [Jesus Christ] answered and said unto them, [the Pharisees] Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?

Matthew 15:7 Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias [Isiah] prophesy of you saying,

15:8 this people draweth nigh [near] unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with *their* lips; but their heart is far from me.

15:9 But in vain do they worship me, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men.

The Pharisees weren't the only religious group that practiced legalism. As the early Christians got farther away from the Word of God in practice and in doctrine, then legalism would get more extreme. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD there were other groups and teachers who taught legalism and required their followers to obey their rules and regulations. Some of these groups took their legalism way beyond the Old Testament law.

A History Of The Christian Church 1985 Wiliston Walker

"Marcionite believers were required to abstain from all sexual intercourse, even in marriage. Marcion's rigorism is also shown in the requirement that his followers refrained from eating meat."

A key word to notice here is "require," genuine men of God will teach His word and encourage people to do it, whereas legalists require people to do their own doctrine. Nobody wants that kind of religion! You wouldn't either if you are honest! It's amazing that people put up with strange forms of legalism that require them to do things that severely violate both God's Word and common sense.

LEGALISM VERSUS GRACE

A History Of The Christian Church 1985 Wiliston Walker

"Montanus and his followers saw themselves in a relation of complete alienation from the world. Their calling was martyrdom, and their duty was to hope for it and never to flee from persecution. As a preparation for the end of all things, they purified themselves and cut themselves loose from their attachments to society. The Phrygians, as they were frequently called, fasted longer and more elaborately than other Christians and discouraged -- if they did not, like Marcion, forbid -- marriage."

Boy, that sounds like a more than abundant life - - no sex and no food, but they do get to look forward to persecution and martyrdom! Legalism is the opposite of what God would do; on the surface it may be similar, but the end result is the opposite.

Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions 1994

"There was a charismatic group known as the Montanists who claimed fresh revelation which could supersede parts of the New Testament."

The Montanists [followers of Montanus] were not only legalists, they were bent on coming up with a new truth or a new revelation. There will not be any new revelation to supersede the New Testament grace until Jesus Christ returns.

Legalists also have to "kick out" those who disobey or question their legalistic doctrines, which is a form of control and fear motivation. There is a record in the Gospel of John, chapter 9 where there was a man born blind who was healed by Jesus Christ, and his parents were afraid of the legalists to the point where they would not even admit that Jesus Christ had healed their son! You would think that they would be so thankful that they would be telling everybody in town, but no, the legalists had so corrupted their lives with the fear of breaking man's rules and regulations that they were afraid to speak about what God had done for their son.

John 9:20 His parents answered them and said, We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind:

9:21 But by what means he now seeth, we know not, or who hath opened his eyes, we know not: he is of age; ask him: he shall speak for himself.

9:22 These words spake his parents, because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue.

Jesus Christ did not spend all sorts of time running around kicking people out of his ministry; he was too busy moving God's Word, and being compassionate. He taught the Word of God "hot;" and people either believed or they stopped believing and stopped following his ministry.

LEGALISM VERSUS GRACE

John 6:60 Many therefore of his disciples when they had heard *this*, said, This is an hard saying: who can hear it?

John 6:66 From that *time* many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.

Some of the disciples didn't like what Jesus Christ taught, so they left; that was their privilege to choose to believe or not believe.

The Way Living In Love 1972 Elena S. Whiteside

“If someone comes into the ministry, we don’t drop them, we stick with them. We never kick anyone out. They kick themselves out, if they want to go. But they’re always welcome back.” [Said by Dr. Wierwille]

Mark 3:1 And he [Jesus Christ] entered again into the synagogue; and there was a man there which had a withered hand.

3:2 And they watched him, whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him.

The Pharisees were not interested in the man with the withered hand; they wanted to accuse Jesus Christ for not obeying their rules and regulations. It also says in Mark 3:6 that they made plans to kill him. Sometimes legalists are so passionate about their legalism that they kill those who break their laws. A good example of this is the anti-abortion movement today; they harass pregnant women, murder some of the medical staff, and even set bombs at abortion clinics.

John 8:3 And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,

8:4 They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

8:5 Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?

The legalistic scribes and Pharisees were using this woman; they had no concern for her well-being or her life. They were willing to sacrifice her for their legalism and to make Jesus Christ look bad. Legalists hate it when people don't do their law, to the end that they are willing to let people suffer so that their law can be followed.

John 8:7 So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

LEGALISM VERSUS GRACE

8:9 and they which heard *it*, being convicted by *their own* conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, *even* unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

8:10 When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?

8:11 She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

The legalists sure were full of love and compassion for this woman, weren't they? Yet each one of them had at some time broken their law as well, which means that they should have been stoned along with the woman. Legalists don't like it when their hypocrisy is exposed. The legalists did not have compassion on this woman, but Jesus Christ did. True men of God are compassionate with people but still uncompromising on God's Word.

Legalists teach for doctrine commandments of men and tradition instead of teaching the Word of God. They hold the keys of the grace of God, yet they themselves don't walk in it; and they hinder others from entering into grace.

Luke 11:52 Woe unto you lawyers! for ye have taken away the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.

The legalists are usually around waiting for their chance to hinder those who want to walk in the grace of God. They will accuse, and attack viciously when given the chance to stomp on the hearts of God's people. The way to back them down is with His Word - - that's the way that Jesus Christ stopped them cold. We have to walk in the grace of God.

II Timothy 2:1 Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

Grace is the opposite of legalism; grace is undeserved favor; grace is God giving us something even though we don't deserve it. We are to be strong in grace; that is, in the resurrected Christ - - not legalism, not man's rules and traditions. But grace should never be used as a license to sin; that is not God's will.

Romans 6:1,2a What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid.

The true walk of a Christian is a balance. We don't go off to one side and get into legalism or go to the other side and use grace as a license to sin.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

LEGALISM VERSUS GRACE

Ephesians 2:8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God:

2:9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

We were saved by God's grace, not by legalism, and we were not saved by the works of the law.

Hebrews 4:16 Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace and help in time of need.

God's love and God's grace yields boldness and confidence toward God. Legalism says that you are unworthy, you are unholy, you are unsanctified, and that you have to do some burdensome law to become worthy, holy, and sanctified. Yet God's Word says: "come boldly before the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace and help in time of need." It is much easier to choose to be strong in the grace over being steeped in legalism. The choice is yours.

Jeremiah 23:1 Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the Lord.

There are those who call themselves pastors and ministers today who destroy and scatter God's people with legalism.

Jeremiah 23:3 And I will gather the remnant of my flock [God's people] out of all countries whither I have driven them, and bring them again to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase.

23:4 And I will set up shepherds [overseers] over them which shall feed them: [feed them with the Word] and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking, saith the Lord.

The remnant today are those people who don't give up on God just because they have been dumped on by legalists. They still have tender hearts toward God even though their hearts were stomped on by brutal legalists. They still love God's Word even though they have heard it mistaught and wrongly divided and wrongly applied by legalists. God promises that He will bring them into their folds (this represents God's protection), and they shall be fruitful and increase (this represents God's abundance in all of its forms).

Copyright 1998 Jeff Rath