

9. Legalism

In our next session we are going to deal with Peter's compromise with legalism (Gal 2:11-21), so we are going to take a moment to discuss what is meant by legalism.

The word "legalism" does not occur in the Bible but it is a term we use to describe a belief that a system of rules and regulations is necessary for achieving salvation and spiritual growth... legalism focuses on outward acts ... such as obeying laws, following traditions, rules, rituals & ceremonies. Legalism is the idea of 'doing life by following rules' - especially keeping the external 'letter of the law' rather than the internal "spirit of the law."

Legalism is the opposite of trusting in God's grace through personal faith in Jesus Christ. The NT teaching on being saved by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-9) can be summarized like this:

God did everything needed for my salvation in Christ ... it was completely out of His love & mercy ... we did not deserve this at all - in fact we deserve condemnation! God offers salvation in Christ to us as a free gift ... no work or payment required! ...all I need to do is believe God's promise by receiving Christ ... HE then does the saving!

There can be a number of different motivations for a person preferring the works of legalism rather than the free gift of grace. Some examples:-

1. The pride in man's sinful heart says: the idea of grace makes salvation cheap! It is too easy! There's no way it can be as simple! We surely need to work hard to prove ourselves to God. Each one must earn our salvation. If my sin is as bad as the Bible says it is, then surely I have to "do penance" - feel some kind of punishment to make up for the bad things I've done ... or I have to do a lot of good things to outweigh the bad ...

Some people say they will not accept the idea of grace because they do not accept charity. "I've always worked hard & provided for myself. I don't take hand-outs!" This is arrogance - believing that my efforts are good enough!

2. Or it can be hypocrisy that motivates someone. Instead of truly surrendering their life to the Lord on God's terms, they want their own way, but want to make it appear to others as if they are saved. They fool others by "looking the part."
3. It can be a matter of exercising control over others ... one way of doing this is to make up a set of rules & traditions and then convince people that it is desirable to join this group ... all they have to do is follow the rules & they will get the benefit of being accepted in the group ... and if they follow this system God will be pleased with them & will reward them!
Acceptance & spirituality is measured by attendance at meetings ... dressing a certain way or wearing your hair a certain length ... handling your finances in a particular way ... using specific vocabulary ... type of music ...
4. Some people prefer a system of outward rules & traditions because it makes them feel secure ... legalism provides definite boundaries & a measurable standard to work toward... you can tell exactly who "belongs to the group" and who doesn't ... you can tell who is "spiritual" & who isn't by seeing who obeys the rules! It is easier than living by faith, because that is not specific enough or measurable. Uniforms & robes make people feel like they belong ... Following some outward rules

allows them to feel good about themselves no matter how badly things are actually going in their lives ... I have a checklist of official rules that I can check off, so nobody can kick me out or say that I don't belong! It is spirituality by rules ... life by sight not faith ... BUT: God's Word teaches the believer to walk by faith!

In the book of Galatians, Paul combats 2 main aspects of legalism:

1. Trying to **gain salvation** through Law & good works
2. Trying to **live the Christian life** by "doing things"

Let us consider the first point:-

1. Trying to **gain salvation** through Law & good works

Gal 2:16 categorically states "that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ" "by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified."

Many millions of religious people around the world try to gain forgiveness & salvation by good works & keeping laws ... they are actually claiming that they can become righteous & justified by their own efforts! Rom 10:3 speaks of those who seek to "establish their own righteousness"

Here are some of the things that people do hoping to make themselves acceptable to God and to get to heaven :- going to church & trying to be good... keeping the commandments ... becoming a church member ... getting baptised & confirmed ... keeping the sabbath ... giving to charity ... helping the poor & feeding the hungry ... not eating certain foods (e.g. pork) ... wearing long dresses or a suit & tie ... not dancing or playing cards, etc

But all these things are external & cannot undo our transgressions these things cannot save us from our sins or bring forgiveness ... these things cannot change our heart (Colossians 2:23 "These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.")

Rom. 3:28 clearly teaches that a person can only be "justified by **faith** apart from works of the Law". **Why?** Because it is not possible to keep the Law enough to be saved!

Cf. James 2:10 For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. (Chain illustration: if you are hanging over a cliff by a chain, how many links have to break before you fall? ONLY ONE! One bad link will cause you to fall.)

God is perfect, holy & righteous; He is totally without any sin, fault or error. Only people who match up to HIS standard can go to heaven! God's grading system is that anything less than 100% is a fail! Nothing imperfect is acceptable to God.

The problem is that NONE of us are perfect & none of us can 100% keep the 10 Commandments ALL of the time!

The Bible warns that people bring a curse upon themselves by trying to keep the law to get salvation: Gal. 3:10, "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them."

Did you catch that? Unless you do EVERYTHING in the law & do it perfectly ALL the time, you fail & are cursed!

Cf. Romans 3:20 “Therefore by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”

Cf. Gal 3:11 “But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”

What a clear statement of New Testament salvation is given in Eph 2:-

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

NOTICE: “grace ... faith ... not of yourselves ... not of works”

There is NO salvation through the Law & good works! ONLY by God’s undeserved grace. The repentant sinner must trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation through His shed blood on the cross.

2. The second form of legalism Paul deals with in Galatians is “Trying to **live the Christian life** by “doing things”.... attempting to become more holy or spiritual by self effort ... following rules, & trying hard to look like a Christian ... obeying the law & external observances of rituals & traditions.

Some say “one is saved by faith but kept by works” therefore they say confirmation, baptism, or church membership are necessary & the law is the believer's rule of life.

Sadly, many believers fall into such legalistic thinking. Many churches demand adherence to their own man-made traditions & rules ... they claim their methods, rules & traditions are the only way to be holy or be spiritual! But **Colossians 2:16-23** speaks against such legalism:

“So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.”

- man-made rules, legalism and religion cannot make us spiritual, nor can they help us in our struggle against sin & lusts.

Galatians shows us that the Christian has died to the law, and he leads a life of holiness, not by his own ability or efforts, but by the power of the Christ through the Holy Spirit:-

Galatians 2:19-21 For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. (20) I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (21) I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.”

Galatians 3:2-5 tells us that the believer receives the Spirit by faith ... that we began our Christian life in the Spirit when we were born again and it is the work of the Spirit that will mature us in our walk

Galatians 3:27 is a strong declaration : a true believer has been clothed with Christ! We are IN Christ! A new position & new identity.

Galatians 4:4-6 says we are redeemed from the law, and adopted as sons of God the Holy Spirit indwells us & leads us in our relationship with the Father

Galatians 5:1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

Galatians 5:16 I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.

Galatians 5:18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Galatians 5:22-25 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, (23) gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. (24) And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (25) If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

Galatians 6:14-15 But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (15) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.

We are a new creation in Christ ... we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit ... we are free from bondage and not under obligation to live by rules, traditions & works ... God's perfect love to us has cast out fear, so we live securely in our relationship to God by faith ... resting in the sufficiency & perfection of our Saviour Jesus Christ in His Person & His Work on our behalf!

This being the case, does the OT Law have any place today?

“How should New Testament Believers relate to the OT Law?

Does this mean that Christians are “antinomian” (i.e. against law/ lawless)? Are believers without restraint? NO!

Is each individual just “led by inner light” or subjective feelings?? NO!

In our next session, I would like to look at these questions.