

Legalism, An Evil in the Church

by Rene Brown

Of all the problems in the church, one of the most universal is "legalism". First let us try to define legalism as it pertains to the church. Simply put, it is trying to establish our righteousness by keeping a law or someone else trying to establish your righteousness by putting you under law. You would seldom find a Christian who has any real knowledge of the gospel and God's word that would admit to living under legalism. Yet many are doing that very thing. While many espouse a life lived in the grace of God, they seek, day after day, to establish or maintain a position with God through keeping laws - Moses' law, denominational rules, others' law, or laws of their own making.

What brings people in general and church leaders in particular into legalism? In the past century, one thing has been the continual drift of much of the church towards a very liberal interpretation of God's word. God's word has been questioned as to authenticity and accuracy, questioned as to whether it is really "God breathed" or written by the Holy Spirit Himself. In some cases people have re-written the bible to conform to what many would like to have it say; that is conformed to modern morality.

As a reaction to this slide into a liberal interpretation of God's word, some desiring to establish a holy life see the solution as making God's word a written code of law to live by to establish and maintain holiness. And so God's written word becomes a rule book to maintain righteousness. Considering the place that "grace" has in God's word, perhaps most easily seen Paul's letters in the New Testament, this is amazing.

Part of the problem is that man is inherently a religious creature. He was made in God's image and so there is something in him that just naturally yearns for the religious, something that causes him to seek after God. But the opposing force that confuses this natural bent to seeking after God is man's sinful nature that causes him to want to establish his own righteousness. Man wants to do it his way. This perversion is what brought the Israelites to the condition we see in the Pharisees in Jesus' day.

God's word plainly says that man shall live by faith. Habakkuk 2:4 (NKJV) "Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; But the just shall live by his faith." Galatians 2: 16 (NKJV) "knowing that **a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ**, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified." Galatians 3: 11 (NKJV) "But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God *is* evident, for the just shall live by faith." Somehow the Pharisees had missed this admonition. Not being content with the Ten Commandments or "Moses' law", they added hundreds of other defining laws to live by so that more and more as time went on they were trying to establish their righteousness completely by keeping these laws.

What was Jesus' answer to them? In Mark 7:6-7 (NKJV) we read, "He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: "This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. ⁷And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men; the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do." So Jesus condemned their attempts to establish righteousness by adding more and more defining points to God's law. Their problem is somewhat like that of a man who puts on a shirt and begins to button the shirt on the wrong button hole. He continues on down the front of the shirt buttoning more and more buttons. But nothing gets any better. If we start wrong, we continue wrong, and it never gets better. No amount of laws added will make things better nor will it make us righteous.

If we begin with the idea that God wants us to be holy by making His word (the Bible) a rule book, it will never get any better. We will just search God's word for more and more things we can make a rule and failing that, we will just add rules of our own in our lives that seem to conform to what God wanted in the first place. That is how the Pharisees came to the "washing of pitchers and cups" as a part of establishing their righteousness.

Now as a rule of cleanliness there is nothing wrong with "washing of pitchers and cups". But it will never have anything to do with righteousness. Note the strong words Paul writes in his letter to Timothy. [1Timothy 1:9 (NKJV) "knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners.]" He clearly says the law is not made for the righteous person.

How can Paul make such a glaring statement? Because he is speaking of God's written word. It was given to make the sinful man, the lost man, see the sorry condition of his soul. It was to stand as an ensign to tell him how wrong he was in his way of life. It was to put the lie to his subtle beliefs that he was "alright" or "good as the next person" or "not a bad person". In the face of God's word man is supposed to see how bad he really is and how hopeless it would be to try and establish his own righteousness. That was always the purpose of the law of God. All the law can do is tell you that you are a sinner. It cannot assist you in becoming righteous. Its purpose is to press you towards the Lord.

Then what use is the Bible for a believer? What use is God's word for one who is in Christ? Oh, very valuable indeed, it is of supreme use. The Lord uses this to accomplish His purpose in our lives. [Hebrews 8: 10 (RSV) "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.]" So we see from this verse in Hebrews that He plans to write His laws on our hearts. In other words, He plans to make them a part of us, a part of our very nature. He never intended that we should live our lives with a rule book (Bible or otherwise) in our hands - one eye on the rule-book and the other on our own lives. No, rather He wants His laws to become a part of our very nature, and that we should have our eyes on Him and not a rule book, not even the Bible.

Going back to the example of buttoning the shirt, the Lord intended even from Adam in the Garden of Eden that man should live in an abiding, intimate relationship with Him. We cannot do that if we start with the wrong premise of living with God by looking into our rule book every day to see how we should live. The tree where Eve took the fruit was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

[Genesis 2: 17 "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.]" Most people think the main problem was that now Adam and Eve had knowledge of evil but God said "good" and evil. Ever since then man has tried to substitute his knowledge of "good" to live his life rather than just submitting to God day after day.

It is seeking after good that gets the people in trouble who follow a liberal interpretation of God's word. They are not seeking after evil but rather for good. But in seeking for good rather than seeking for God, they are evil and following after evil. That was Adam and Eve's mistake when they sought to become wise. Nothing has changed.

Few people seek after evil. (But there are some who do - evil for evil's sake!) But many have their conscience seared, and they cannot distinguish between good and evil. Some of the most evil men of our time like Adolf Hitler or Edi Amin perhaps never set out on a given day to "do some evil". We can imagine that they saw what they were doing as the thing to be done to bring about circumstances they thought should be accomplished no matter how obviously evil it may seem to others. You know and I

know we have done some evil things in our time (anything not of God is “evil”). Did we ever once think, “I think I will do some evil today”? Not likely!

No, rather, people are frequently seeking after the good. But whether we seek the good or we seek evil, we are working apart from almighty God unless what we are doing what we do because of His direction. Anything done apart from God is sin. The act itself may not be sinful but doing it apart from the almighty, everlasting, eternal Father is what makes it wrong and thus sinful. Separating ourselves from God is sin.

So how do we avoid getting into legalism? First we must understand that no amount of work on our part will establish anything righteous. We have no hope of righteousness apart from the blood atonement of Jesus Christ. Nothing we will ever do, in and of itself, will be righteous apart from the involvement of the Lord Himself. He must be a part of everything we do; indeed, He must be the originator, the author, as it were for what we do in order for it to be righteous.

Now immediately one wants to say, “There is no way this is possible!” But that is exactly what walking by the Spirit and in the Spirit is all about. It is the involvement of the Lord in every moment of our lives. The Holy Spirit was sent to walk along beside us on a continuous basis, day by day.

John 14:16-17 (NKJV) “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever; ¹⁷the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.”

2Tim 1:13-14 (NKJV) “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.”

Perhaps Paul’s words in Galatians are some of the most pointed where legalism is concerned. The entire book deals with trying to become righteous through keeping the law and the consequences of doing that.

Gal 3:1-5 (NKJV) “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? ²This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? ³Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? ⁴Have you suffered so many things in vain; if indeed it was in vain? ⁵Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?”

God intends that His Spirit, working in us and through us, is the force that will accomplish His purposes in our lives. It seems that the Lord is not even interested in anything we might accomplish on our own absent His involvement. In fact, it is sin to try to do things apart from the Lord or outside His power and involvement.

Now these are strong statements for even a serious believer to accept. We need to first understand God’s purposes in even creating us. He created us for **fellowship** with Himself. Anything done apart from Him obviously does not involve fellowship with Him. Therefore it will never accomplish His purpose in our lives. God is not interested in the absolutes of what all we accomplish but rather that it is done with His involvement and under His direction. To think that the totality of the good we might

accomplish in our lives will impress or bless God is foolishness. Rather He wants to be a part of every aspect of our lives. It is a difficult concept to understand that nothing is too small in our lives for God to be disinterested. How often have I lost things only to pray earnestly to the Lord and immediately have an impression of where to look for the lost item and lo, there it would be!

So the opposite of living under legalism is simply living with our eyes on the Lord with His word stowed away in our hearts, being guided by His Spirit, His word stowed away in us so the Holy Spirit can always access the word of God that has become a part of us though we do not even think of it at the moment. Yet, we are guided by it in His Spirit as we live out our lives.

So what do you do if those around you operate under the law, continually trying to live by the letter of the law, the law as they interpret it and also putting you under the law as well? (The law being whatever they say it is!) What does one do if others continually hedge you about by all these laws and rules as opposed to teaching you to walk by and in the Spirit following the law of God which He has stowed away within you? What if they are always pressing you to observe this or that in order to become holy? The best response is to flee! Get out while you can!

Now you may think that is extreme but let us look at again at the book of Galatians: Gal 5:4 (NKJV) "You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." Now what does Paul mean, "estranged from Christ" and "fallen from grace"? The first thing we can say is that this condition is not at all good! By the best interpretation, this is not good. In the worst case, we may think he could mean we have lost our salvation and are eternally damned. In the best case it at least means we have gone our own way, though continuing in Christ, and are no longer operating under the leadership of Christ through the Holy Spirit and we are no longer operating under the covering of His grace.

Of all the things a Christian might lose, it seems like the covering of God's grace might be among the most important. Not walking with and in the Spirit of God sent by the Father and by the Lord Jesus seems to be a very bad situation. So no matter how we interpret it, if we have begun to walk under the law, we are outside the grace of God. And that is a terrible situation for any believer!

So allowing someone to substitute law in your life for the grace of God and operating in fellowship with Him is a severe condition to allow. So again I say, flee! Get away from such a place. Go and fellowship with believers who walk close to the Lord and in fellowship with Him, with believers who have God's word stowed away in their hearts so that they no longer use the bible as a rule book but as a guide to God's working with His creation down through the centuries. Go and be with believers who love God above all, who hear His voice in their hearts and constantly desire to do His will in their lives - a life lived out in intimate fellowship with Him.

Are we reducing the importance of God's written word in our lives? Not at all. Paul is quite clear in the following verse: 2Tim 3:16 (NKJV) "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,"

So it is there for us but it is still not to be used as a rule book to replace the continuous guiding hand of the Holy Spirit. If this sounds too complicated, it is not. We read, we study, and we meditate on God's word daily. But then we look to the Spirit of Christ working in us to guide us to outwork the will of God completely in our lives. We live a life knowing we belong to Him, that we are His children, that He desires the very best for us and that He intends to accomplish that through our submitting ourselves completely to Him.

It is not that we ignore His written word, but that we have allowed Him to put it in our hearts as He expressly promised in Hebrews 8:10 "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel

after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

*******End of Teaching*******