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# INNER WARS—LEGALISM

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*“It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery... A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough.”  
~Galatians 5:1, 9*

*“Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” ~Galatians 3:21-22*

## INTRODUCTION

Among the many unseen foes that do battle in the hearts and minds of believers, few are more covertly destructive than the spirit of the Pharisees. Its dangerous power to diminish God's people and to rob them of their full spiritual inheritance comes from the fact that, while it is diametrically contrary to the *truth* revealed in Jesus, it appears to be profoundly spiritual and religious. That is probably why Paul had to tell the Galatians that even if “*an angel from heaven*” (*Galatians 1:8*) come with the message of legalism—not to be swayed by it. Just because something seems religious or spiritual does not mean that it lines up with God's heart. It is very hard for people to see what is wrong with a religious perspective that is so good at pointing out things that are wrong.

Jesus reserved His harshest condemnations for the Pharisees, whose legalistic religion had strayed so far from God's intent and purpose. As we will see, legalism produces large quantities of self-righteousness, judgment, and condemnation. It majors in guilt and misguided sacrifice—urging its followers to evaluate their relationship with God (and with others) on the basis of standards and scores, rather than on the basis of love and faith. The Pharisees expected Jesus to agree with their high opinion of their own standing with God (and their low opinion of where sinners stood).

Instead, Jesus shocked (and upset) the Pharisees by drawing close to people whose sinful conditions set them well below acceptable standards for “*rightness*.” Why was Jesus so opposed to

the legalists? After all, they were just following the letter of the Law. What was wrong with the way they defined right and wrong? And how does their wrong thinking sometimes wage a war in our minds?

Legalism, as we use the term today, is usually far less conscious and systematized in our minds than it was in the Pharisees. But it has crept into the spiritual life of New Covenant believers far more than most of us realize. Fairly large portions of the New Testament (see especially Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews) address the subject, so it has been an issue in the Church from earliest times. To understand how legalism hinders our relationship with the Lord and with others, we have to define several commonly used terms.

## DEFINITIONS

Faith—Since faith and the works of the Law are contrasted so frequently in the New Testament, let us start by defining it in practical terms. Faith is simply believing what God says—especially what He promises—without regard for our own abilities or resources. The whole point is that He is able to do what we cannot do ourselves. I do not need to have faith in God in order to do something, like whistle; I do not need Him to whistle for me, so I do not need faith that He will. Similarly, if I do not have enough money to pay my rent, I do need faith in His promise to provide for my needs. He does not ask me how much of the rent I am able to come up with on my own.

Having the faith—believing that God is my only source of rescue—is the opposite of having the means (works) to rescue myself. It makes no sense for me to offer to help God do for me what I am utterly incapable of doing for myself. Legalism essentially says that I have to do more to help God, help me if I cannot come up with more. If I cannot do more on my own, God will not take care of my situation. Legalism subtly communicates that my ability, work, or contribution determines the amount and sufficiency of God's work. If I do not do (well) enough, God will not do everything He would otherwise have been able or willing to do on my behalf. Nothing could be further from New Covenant truth!

God does not take His cue from us. He took upon Himself the rescue of the world when we were still hostile to Him; while we were still “*enemies of God*,” He loved us and sent His Son to redeem us. That is the whole point of the Gospel; God in His mercy not dealing with us according to our thoughts or behavior. He, alone initiated His work of grace on our behalf when everything we had been doing set us at odds with Him and His purposes.

## THE LAW THAT LEADS US TO A DISCUSSION OF THE LAW

Although the Law is a terminology used to express several particular aspects of God's counsel to us, most generically, it refers to the guidelines and ordinances given by God to His people on how to

conduct themselves in relationship to Him (worship/sacrifice) and to other people. The Law talks about how to relate to God and to people—that is why Jesus said the whole Law is fulfilled in the two great summary commandments. But there are some facts about it that escape the legalist's attention. First, it maintained a fundamental sense of right/wrong in the midst of absolute lawlessness.

We can forget that there were two trees mentioned in the Garden of Eden—the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*; and the *tree of life*. After Adam and Eve ate of the one tree, God banished them from the Garden of Eden in order to prevent them from eating of the other, and living forever. It is easy to imagine why God—in His mercy—did not want fallen man to live forever. With each passing year, we become so much more sophisticated in evil. When I was seven years old, I had few of the corruptions and imaginations that I have today. With each passing year people become capable of more wrong than in the years before. What would it be like to live in a world filled with unregenerate humans who had been honing their depravities for centuries?

After putting a finite limit to the length of mankind's days, God gave the Law in order to establish a standard that distinguished right from wrong. The Law acted as a kind of guardrail to keep the world from hurling completely off a cliff as it careened recklessly down through the ages. It introduced into an unfathomably evil world a basic morality—one that was not intended to completely wipe away its wrong—but to give the world an awareness of its waywardness. The Law was like a landmark on the horizon; it gave people a reference point with which to evaluate where they stood with regard to right and wrong.

## **OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS NOT BASED ON THE LAW**

The Law also served to distinguish God's people from all the surrounding nations; it was given to those who were already His people. The Law never was the basis for relationship with God. It might be compared to rules that parents have for their children—patterns for family life that are intended to train the kids to live in such a way that they are best equipped for life.

When neighbor kids come to our house, they are expected to follow our rules (no rock throwing, no name calling, no bad language or stinky attitudes): "If you want to do those things, you will have to do them someplace else." No matter how well neighborhood youngsters may abide by those rules, they do not become our children. Good behavior may be grounds for an early release from prison, but it is not grounds for adoption. How we live as a family is not what makes us a family. We are family because of blood; we resemble one another. As a family, we adopt certain ways of living, but we do not adopt anyone who just happens to live the same way.

Additionally, no matter how poorly our children may keep the rules, their relationship with us is not jeopardized. The wall in my office is decorated with neatly framed pictures of our four children. The pictures of each child change each year (one of the benefits of school pictures) until the senior

portrait marks the end of childhood. Last year, while two of the pictures were conspicuously off the wall being changed, several people joked with me about what a kid had to do to be removed from the Brown family. As sad as it is to acknowledge children being “disowned” in dysfunctional families, the basic truth still remains: our kids will always be our kids.

Legalism creates doubt about the permanence of our relationship with God—or, at least, the closeness of that connection. Its whispers or insinuates that because we have done wrong in breaking the rules, God is reconsidering His role as our Father. Legalists live in a state of perpetual probation, feeling that one or two more of their goofs are all it will take for God to reject them. Legalism makes us feel like we need to work hard at getting back into His good graces. What an ironic distortion! Relationship with God has always and only been on the basis of what we believe, not on how we behave.

### ***What are the Limitations of the Law?***

- Only forbids and condemns sin; cannot forgive or help us overcome it (Galatians 2:16).
- Cannot establish our relationship with God (Galatians 4:4-7).
- Only inscribed on stone or paper, its inner voice comes from outside.
- Cannot receive the Spirit, or minister in the miraculous gifts of the Spirit (Galatians 3:1-5).
- Only a tutor or custodian to lead us to Christ (Galatians 3:23-26)—we cannot keep it, and it cannot keep (*justify*) us.

### ***What are Some Temptations for Believers to Live by the Law Instead of by Faith?***

- We know we are supposed to be good and live right. We forget that the real issues are being righteous and having relationship with God through Jesus.
- It is comfortable to have “*benchmarks*” with which to evaluate ourselves (*and others*). But that easily leads to judgment and condemnation.
- We like formulas and prescriptions—especially when we can do our part.

*How Does Legalism Sometimes Manifest in Our Lives?*

- You are ‘wrong’ equals you are ‘bad,’ which equals you are in trouble with God, which equals, God doesn’t love you as much as He used to, which equals, you should avoid Him until you are (a) better (*Christian*).
- I know what is wrong with me (*others*). If I (*they*) would have (*not*) done X, I (*they*) would be—more, better, happier, used by God.
- Feeling I’ve done everything the way I’m supposed to, so how come it isn’t working; things aren’t turning out; I’m still in the same place; other people are further along; etc?
- Feeling little, if any, sense of God’s delight in us. Feeling like nothing we do will be good enough. Lots of ups and downs.