

Don't Let Legalism

FAKE
REAL

Rip You Off!

Neil Silverberg

in order to be *right* with God. To be legalistic is to believe our relationship with God is dependent on how well we perform. The Google Dictionary defines it as “dependence on moral law rather than on personal religious faith.” Based on this definition, legalism is the belief that I must perform some task in order to earn God’s favor.

By this definition, most man-made religions are legalistic. Judaism, for example, is a life lived by Torah observance (there are only 613 commandments to keep). Islam is also based on a system of rules and principles designed to achieve a betterment of humankind. Buddhism is based on dependence on moral law rather than on personal religious faith. In this way, we see that most major world religions require a person to

Iwrote *Shadows and Substance: The Truth About Jewish Roots and Christian Believers* to address those involved in the Hebrew Roots Movement (HRM). In actuality, that book deals with one of the forms legalism takes. The real problem is *legalism* itself. This short E-book addresses legalism in general, both its nature and character without addressing any specific form it may take.

Simply stated, legalism *is anything we believe we must do or perform*

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perform religious deeds in order to be accepted by God and are therefore legalistic.

Christianity differs in that it is the only one of the world religions (if it can be called that) which isn't legalistic. That doesn't mean that those who practice it don't do so legalistically, many often do. But at its core, Christianity differs from the others in that the Christian faith teaches that the Creator God

provided everything necessary to bring fallen creatures from their fallen state into a righteous relationship with Himself.

The Gospel is not merely the MESSAGE that gets us in, it's ALSO the MESSAGE which KEEPS and EMPOWERS us.

This can be summed up in three words uttered from the cross of the God-Man—*"it is finished"* (John 19:30). I once heard a Bible teacher say that the verb finished in this text could be translated perfect or complete so that it could read 'it is perfectly perfect; it is

completely complete.' There is nothing needed to be added to his atoning work; it has accomplished everything God intended. Therefore, the Gospel can be summed up by the word done rather than the word doing.

Why then do so many Christians still fall into the trap of legalism? There are several reasons but the primary one is many believers treat the Gospel as only the message which gets them *into* the kingdom—once they're in, they put the Gospel on the shelf and focus on other things such as the rigors of discipleship, prayer and evangelism. But as pastor Tim Keller says, because the Gospel is put on the shelf, these things (prayer, discipleship and evangelism) are difficult to carry out, not being sweetened by the Gospel. But the Gospel is not merely the

message that gets us in, it's also the message which keeps and empowers us. In a word, every advance one makes in the Christian life comes by gaining a greater understanding of the gospel.

Without a growing understanding of the gospel, we can easily slip into the mindset that God is always evaluating our performance to see if we are working hard enough to merit the blessings He promises. When we perform well, we are rewarded, but when we don't, we fall short of receiving the reward. Until I learned the grace of the Gospel, I lived under such a mindset for many years. I have often said that I felt like those Etch-a-Sketch toys we give to our kids where you write on the screen and when you lift it up, the writing disappears. Each

morning, I felt like God wrote my name in the book of life, but at the end of the day he removed it saying, "Good try son: try again tomorrow." The next day I worked hard only to find my name removed again at the end of the day.

What I lacked (and eventually gained) was a solid assurance, not based on my own performance, but on the solid record of the finished work of the Son of God. But I continued to believe that the blessings God had promised were based on how well I performed. This was a trap since my performance never rose to the measure of God's demand. So inevitably, I walked through life with a low-grade guilt, feeling as if I continually failed God.

God Doesn't Judge on the Curve

My problem (contributing to my tendency towards legalism) is that I secretly cherished the belief that God judges on the curve. The problem with this idea is that it distorts the perfect nature of God. God cannot judge on the curve since he is righteous and must uphold the Law: "*Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them*" (Deut. 27: 26 emphasis mine). James, the brother of Jesus who wrote this letter by the same name, no doubt had this verse in mind:

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of

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all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

James 2:10

Could there be a higher standard than that? God demands perfect obedience, not halfhearted attempts. He does not judge us on how hard we have tried but on the Law's requirements of perfect obedience to every commandment. As James clearly states we cannot but fail to obey when it comes to attaining perfection by Law.

This is why legalism is so deceiving. It is based on the mistaken belief that we humans can meet the standards God

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has given through our performance.

Take, for example, the rich young ruler who came to Jesus wanting to know what good thing he must do to inherit eternal life (Matthew 19:16). Take note that he thought eternal life could be attained through performance (“what good thing must I do to inherit eternal life”). Jesus affirmed that he must keep the commandments if he wanted to inherit eternal life.

Jesus sent him to the Law that the Law might do its PERFECT work of convicting sinners so they might RUN to Jesus Christ ALONE for salvation.

Did Jesus actually believe that eternal life could be attained through keeping the commandments? Yes and no. If a person perfectly kept the commandments he could, in fact, inherit eternal life. But Jesus knew that that was impossible.

Why then did he not tell him that faith alone was the means of inheriting eternal life? Jesus sent him to the Law that the Law might do its perfect work of convicting sinners so they might run to Jesus Christ *alone* for salvation. In other words, by telling him he must keep the commandments in order to be saved, Jesus was not teaching that sinners could keep the Law. Rather, he intended the law do its perfect work of exposing the “*exceedingly sinful*ness of sin” (Romans 7:13).

In my book *New Covenant Life*, I used an analogy borrowed from Roy Hession’s book, *From Shadow to Substance*. He tells of someone walking in a pasture and suddenly he sees a bull sleeping peacefully in the sunlight. That person may (mistakenly) conclude by seeing the bull lying so serene that the bull is a peaceful creature. To test his theory, he goes to the trunk of his car and retrieves a red blanket, and standing about a hundred yards from the bull, begins to wave it furiously. What is the result? Suddenly, that beast is aroused as the fierce creature it is and begins chasing that person.

Did the blanket transform the beast, or did it merely arouse its true nature? Clearly it is the latter. The bull was a raging animal all along; the blanket

was the means of revealing his true nature. In the same way, the Law is the instrument which God uses to make visible our true *fallen* nature. It was never given as the means of obtaining salvation, but as the vehicle through which sin becomes exceedingly sinful (Romans 7:13). That is why the law was given in the first place; *“Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary”* (Galatians 3:19).

The Blood Cleanses from All Sin

How then do we stay free from legalism? The answer lies in learning

how to properly handle guilt. There are two types of guilt we must deal with, *false* and *real* guilt. False guilt is often experienced by those with overactive consciences. It is guilt, not as the result of actual disobedience, but being falsely accused. People with overactive consciences often feel responsible for everything and thus blame themselves for others' failures. Satan is the accuser of the brethren and believers need to be on guard against his attempts to make them feel guilty without reason.

But how do we deal in the case of real guilt resulting from actual transgression? The apostle John seems to speak to that in the first chapter of his first epistle where he says, *“if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one*

The apostle Paul defines LIGHT as the willingness to deal with whatever THE LIGHT exposes.

another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (I John 1:7). One version makes it even more emphatic stating that the blood covers “every sin.” In other words, there is nothing the blood can’t deal with. It is efficacious (powerful) when it comes to dealing with sin. The condition for experiencing such cleansing is to “walk in the light as he is in the light.” Later in this chapter, the apostle says, “God is light and in him is no darkness at all” (I Jn. 1:6). What does John mean when he describes God as being *light*?

It means that God is the perfection of holiness. Human beings are a mixture of both light and darkness, but in God there is only perfect light. This is God’s unsullied and absolute holiness unlike the dichotomy we see in ourselves.

Anyone claiming to have fellowship with God therefore must walk in the light (“*If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth*”). In the Ephesian letter, the apostle Paul defines light as the willingness to deal with whatever the light exposes (“*But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light*” (Ephesians 5:13). In other words, light is that which exposes the things hidden in the darkness.

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A good example of the way in which light exposes what is hidden in the darkness can be seen in the Old Testament high priest entering the Holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. It is believed that when the high priest entered on that day, the linen he wore showed its stains and blemishes in the piercing light of God's presence. That is why there was no artificial light in the Holy of holies—God Himself illuminated that compartment! For this reason, the high priest was instructed to burn incense so that the cloud of incense would cover the ark and the priest would not look upon the glory of God.

The high priest was also instructed to sprinkle the blood of a goat seven times upon the Mercy Seat when he entered the Holiest of all on the Day of

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Atonement. On any other day, when God looked upon the Ark, He would have seen the Law which meant that wrath would be poured out due to transgression. But on that day, he saw the sprinkled blood covering the Mercy Seat indicating that because a death had occurred which atoned for sin, God could be a forgiving God.

The writer of Hebrews makes this point even clearer when he says,

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come then *through* the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means

of the blood of goats and calves but *by means of his own blood*, thus securing an eternal redemption.

(Hebrews 9:11-13 italics mine).

Special attention should be drawn to the phrase *by means of his own blood* in these verses. It answers the question, 'Who was the first one to test the efficacy of the blood? The short answer is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. Why is that important? *Because, if the Lord Jesus was able to return to heaven bearing the sins of the entire world by means of his own blood, there is no sin that can keep me out of his presence if I come by way of the blood also.* Jesus demonstrated by his entrance back into heaven that the blood is powerful enough to expunge *any and every sin.*

if the Lord Jesus was able to return to heaven **bearing the sins of the ENTIRE world by means of his own blood**, there is **NO SIN** that can keep me **out of His presence** IF I come by way of **THE BLOOD.**

This is the ultimate encouragement to come boldly to the *“throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”* (Hebrews 4:16). Because of our condition, we need both mercy and grace in abundance. If we come by the way of the blood, we can be confident that our God will be both merciful and gracious.

Only by many trips to the Mercy Seat can we be sure of remaining free from legalism. Soon after my conversion, I received a biography of a great English prayer warrior named John Hyde. He was a man given to a life of constant intercession (they called him *Praying* Hyde).

I read in his story how he rose at 3AM each morning to spend three hours in uninterrupted prayer. I immediately felt guilty that I didn't rise at the same time and pray for three hours. So, I decided then and there I would begin rising at three to give myself to intercession. I was able to do so for only a few days; I soon caught myself sleeping in my chair. Each time I failed, I recommitted myself to rise early and pray the next morning. But no matter what I did, I kept failing in my commitment. Soon,

I gave up entirely, chastising myself for my lack of discipline.

After consigning myself to being a failure when it came to prayer, the Holy Spirit began to show me where the real problem lay. It wasn't in my lack of commitment or discipline but in my failure to handle guilt in a New Covenant way. When I first felt guilt about my failure to pray instead of bringing it into the light, I started an elaborate works program to get rid of it. But what I really needed to do was deal with the real problem: *I had a cold heart and needed God to give me the grace of a praying heart.* When I confessed my cold heart and repented of my legalism, the spirit of grace came and gave me not only the desire to pray, but the mechanics as well (what time to rise and what disciplines

I should practice). And to this day, I practice those disciplines which grace first formed in my heart.

The book of Hebrews contains a couple of verses that sheds much light on this:

“For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, *purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God*” (Hebrews 9:13-14, italic mine).

What does the writer of Hebrews mean when he speaks of having our conscience cleansed from ‘*dead works*’? He is undoubtedly referring to any attempt to be justified by observing works of the law. The broader application is that they are any works one performs to cleanse the conscience from guilt. I am not suggesting that one doesn’t need to repent if he or she discovers they have sinned for God requires it. But it must be real, *New Covenant* repentance, rather than the Old Covenant type.

New Covenant Repentance

When I was a new believer, I got the impression that repentance was an emotion rather than a decision of the

will. For that reason, I always thought the women in the church were much better at repenting than the men. But in actuality, while repentance can and often is accompanied by powerful emotions, it is not essentially an emotion at all. It simply means to '*change the mind*'. The word originally had no religious meaning at all. If I make a decision to go to McDonald's and then decide to go to Burger King, I have repented (changed my mind).

The fact that repentance is a change of mind and not merely an emotion is seen in the apostle Paul's comparison between two types of sorrow accompanying repentance: *worldly* sorrow and *godly* sorrow (see II Corinthians 7:10). Worldly sorrow is sorrow not for having sinned but for having our sin exposed. Worldly

sorrow often blames others for the sin it has committed. A good example of that can be seen in Israel's first king, Saul. When he was caught by Samuel in transgression, he always blamed others, never taking personal responsibility for his sin. This is unlike David who, when confronted with his sin admitted, "I have sinned" (2 Samuel 12:13).

In light of the fact that repentance means to change the mind, what do we have to change our minds about? We must change our mind in recognizing that our sin is essentially against God and God *alone*. David makes this clear when he tells God in his great Psalm of repentance "against you, you *only*, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4, italics mine). Remember how grievously he

had sinned by committing adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. And afterwards, when David learned that Bathsheba was pregnant with his child, he made matters worse by arranging her husband's death in battle by commanding his general to put him on the front line and withdrawing from him. David committed two sins, both of which there was no atonement for, adultery and murder.

How can David say that he sinned against God *only* when he sinned against both Bathsheba and Uriah? David isn't denying that he sinned against both of them but that his *real* sin was against God. To understand that more clearly take, for example, the sin of bearing false witness (lying). To lie is to certainly sin against the person to whom you lied. But ultimately a lie is

a sin against truth. But what is truth? Biblically, *truth* is not an ideal or a moral system, but the One who said, "I am the *truth*" (John 14:6). So, if I lie to a person, I am sinning against a person, but ultimately, I am sinning against God who is truth. In that way, all sin ultimately is against God.

Not Under Law but Grace

"For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14). The apostle Paul, writing to the Roman assembly assures them that sin will not have power over the believer since he is no longer under the law but under grace. For him, the only way a believer can overcome sin is by living

fully in the grace of God. Later in the next chapter, Paul tells them *“Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God”* (Romans 7:4). Since everyone born is born under the Law, the only way out from under the Law is by having died to it. Since we can't affect our own death, how can we die? The answer is, when we believed we were joined to Christ so that we now share in *his* death.

That's why legalism is so deceiving. It looks like the proper way to overcome sin, but it is actually opposed to the Gospel way. Paul unpacks that more fully in the next chapter by giving us an intimate account of how the law only increases the sin problem:

“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”

Romans 7:7-12

For Paul, the Law is the only means of making us aware of our sin. Remember the analogy I used earlier about a person encountering a bull sleeping peacefully in a pasture. It's only when the man retrieved a red blanket from his trunk and began waving it furiously in front of him that the true nature of the bull was aroused. In the same way, sinners seem to be fine until they are measured by the Law. Then their real nature is exposed, and they stand condemned. This is why legalism always results in condemnation since righteousness can never be obtained through Torah observance. This is why Paul said, "*the law is good, if one uses it lawfully*" (I Timothy 1:8). The law was never intended for the "just but for the lawless and disobedient" (I Timothy 1:9). In other words, once the law has done its work of condemning sinners, it

is no longer needed for righteousness.

Faith Breaks the Back of Legalism

How is legalism broken in our lives? The Bible is clear: *only by continued faith in the grace of the Gospel*. In other words, we must cleave to the Gospel which we first believed in and by which we were initially saved.

The Christian life is often referred to as the Christian *walk*. Why is it referred to as a walk? A walk is a first step repeated again and again. The same thing is true with the Christian life. The first step we took to become Christians is now repeated again and again. And what was that first step by which we became believers? *It was putting our faith completely in the finished work of*

Jesus Christ. When we first heard the Gospel, the message was not calling us to do something, but *to believe the proclamation of what God has already accomplished through the work of his Son, Jesus.*

Jesus made this clear when asked by a crowd what they must do to work the works of God. He replied, *“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent”* (John 6:29). The work of God is first and foremost to believe in Jesus Christ and the work he has done. As stated earlier, this is in keeping with Jesus’ own word uttered on the cross: *“It is finished”* (John 19:30 italics mine).

That is why faith alone breaks the head of legalism for legalism is rooted in the belief that something must be

added to the work of Christ. But the apostle makes clear that, *“he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”* (Philippians 1:6). The God who began the work in hearts promises to finish what he started. That means that we must trust the work of a sovereign King to bring to completion what he started. *“For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”* (Philippians 2:13).

The Older Brother was a Legalist

Legalism therefore is the dreaded enemy of the Gospel of grace. Its fruit is clearly portrayed in various ways throughout Scripture but none more clearly than in the parable known as the Prodigal Son told by Jesus in Luke

15. Some have suggested that the real title should be The Parable of the Two Lost Boys. That is because both boys were prodigal.

The younger brother who openly rebelled wasting his father's wealth in riotous living was obviously prodigal. But so was the older brother who, even though he never left the house, didn't have a clue about his Father's heart. While the beginning of the parable focuses mostly on the younger brother, it concludes by highlighting the older brother who refuses to come in the house.

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When his father comes out to him and compels him to come in the house, the older brother responds by saying, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends" (Luke 15:28-29). This older brother is a case study in legalism which manifests in two ways in the older brother's words.

First, is the fact that legalism subtly (and not so subtly) makes one feel that God owes them something for their good deeds. A man whose mother died of painful cancer reminded the Lord that He owed her more than that since she was a faithful intercessor for many years.

But the elder brother's legalism can

also be seen by the fact that his words are dripping with resentment (“you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends”). He only sees what he has been deprived of (even though all of the father’s resources are technically his). Legalists are often angry at themselves (‘why didn’t I do more’) or else are angry at God (‘why does he always deprive me’). Either way, they are easily embittered.

Only a deep reception of grace can change an embittered person’s heart. Listen to the gracious words the father speaks to his oldest son: *“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found”* (Luke 15:32-32). No censure at all but words of kindness and appeal. Such

is the father’s heart towards the older prodigal.

Gospel Preaching and the Means of Grace

The only cure for legalism therefore is to receive grace deep in the heart. We must daily practice *“drawing near to the throne of grace”* so that we may *“receive mercy and find grace to help in need”* (Hebrews 4:16). Except for such doses of grace, we are helplessly bound to being embittered and feeling God owes us something. Only by being constantly immersed in the grace of God can we be assured of staying free from bondage.

We must also be sure we use all of the *means* of grace available to us. There are several God gives to

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us but none is more important than that we are constantly sitting under Gospel preaching. Since, as Paul says, “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the message of Christ” (Romans 10:17), nothing compares to sitting under biblical Gospel teaching and preaching. Sadly, this is not always the primary thing people are looking for when seeking a local church. Other factors such as style of worship music and youth ministry are usually the first thing many look for when analyzing a church for membership.

I can personally testify to the importance gospel preaching plays in staying free from legalism. It has been a major means of my own freedom from legal bondage. There is nothing like the clean air of the freshness of the gospel poured over the soul through

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grace filled preaching. No wonder most revivals throughout Church History were spawned and maintained by passionate gospel preaching. May God continue to raise up those who are entirely given to gospel preaching so that a new generation of believers may learn the untold rhythms of grace.

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