

Articles and Sermons :: A Look At Legalism

A Look At Legalism - posted by moreofHim (), on: 2004/8/30 9:19

I love it when a message hits close to home. I love reminders that I am not what I'd like others to think I am. Ouch- but in a good way.

Do you remember what your life was like before you surrendered to Christ? You were an enemy of God living in blindness, a lost soul without hope. You were ungodly, guilty - and the wrath of God was "abiding on you" (see John 3:36).

How did you find forgiveness and acceptance before God?
How did you enter into the blessed assurance you were saved, rejoicing in the love of Jesus Christ?

Was it because God saw something good in you? Did you possess some inherent righteousness that attracted Him to you? Did you earn His favor with obedience and kindness?

No - absolutely not! No one is ever saved by his own works or merit. Scripture says, "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6).

The apostle Paul did not want to be found standing before Christ in his own righteousness. Here was a good man - a Pharisee who had diligently kept all the numerous rules and regulations of the law. He paid tithes faithfully. He loved God with all his heart. He attended all the functions of the synagogue. He studied the Word of God endlessly. He loved his fellow man and went about doing good. According to the law, Paul was a perfect man.

But all that became as rubbish to Paul - he counted it all as loss - when he came into the revelation of the righteousness of Christ!

"But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.... And do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Philippians 3:7-9).

To Be Made Righteous By Faith
Is The Hardest Thing
For The Flesh To Accept!

There are many sincere believers today who have not yet submitted to the righteousness of Christ. They still go about trying to please God by their good deeds. They accept salvation by faith but then they want to take over from there!

There is something in our flesh that rebels against a faith-walk. We want to earn our salvation - to help God out! We don't mind being saved by faith; but we don't want to live by faith. Our flesh cries out, "All my obedience, all my hard work to please God - it has to count for something!" Yes, it is worth something - but not for meriting forgiveness and pardon!

We don't want to accept that we are made right before God simply by believing. We would rather "bite the bullet" - and when temptation overwhelms us, we say through gritted teeth, "Bless God, I'll get victory if it kills me!" (And it will kill you!).

But that is not the path to victory. Obedience and faithfulness come as a result of standing steadfast on the rock of justification by faith alone!

Paul said this of a certain people: "They have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth" (Romans 10:2-4).

These people were trying "to establish their own righteousness." We know that process by another name: legalism!

Legalism is misunderstood by most Christians. Even most ministers don't know what it is.

I used to believe legalism had to do with man-made rules and regulations designed by sincere, God-loving people who were trying to lead holy lives. I thought it was all about observing dress-code restrictions and other do's and don't's.

No - legalism is much more subtle than rules and regulations. It goes far beyond that!

When I was a boy, I heard evangelists thunder against the sins of the day. They preached against bobbed hair, women's "open-toe" shoes, makeup and fancy dresses. This was called "Holiness" preaching - but the standards kept changing with the new fads.

I thought that was legalism!

When I first came to New York City more than thirty

years ago, I was shocked by all the rigid rules in Hispanic Pentecostal churches. Our workers would go to the streets, pray with drug addicts and try to get them into local churches. But if a newly saved girl was wearing jeans or makeup, the pastor would rush out and say, "You can't come in here dressed like that!"

One minister told a young girl, "Go home and dress like a woman - then come back. We don't allow worldliness in this church!"

I thought that was legalism!

A young couple in England who received our newsletters began listening to tapes of our services at Times Square Church. They grew to love the messages of holiness. So they came to visit - but when I met them after a service, they looked hurt, crushed, their eyes filled with tears. They told me they were upset because the women in our church did not wear head coverings! They said, "How can the Holy Spirit be at work here, when you don't obey the command to cover a woman's head?"

I thought that was legalism!

I hear from prayer groups all across the country who are tossed, turned and left confused by all kinds of new rules brought in by passing teachers. One tells them, "You must kneel to pray. God hears only those who kneel." Another teacher comes along and says, "You must sit in His presence. You need not kneel - that is Catholic!" Someone else says, "You must stand when the Bible is read. You dishonor God when you sit during the reading of the Word!" Yet another tells them, "That is bondage! Jesus made the people sit when He preached the Word!"

I thought all this was legalism!

It is indeed all rules and regulations. But all of this is only a part of legalism - it is not the heart of the matter.

Legalism is far worse than all these things. In fact, all of us have a bit of its leaven in our hearts - because legalism is based on pride!

Legalism Is an Outward Show,
a Facade - a Pretense of Holiness
to Impress People, Not God!

At its heart, legalism is a desire to appear holy. It is trying to be justified before men and not God!

Legalism is wanting to be known as a prophet, a man of prayer, a woman of intercession - and feeding and fostering such an image!

The legalist is not out to earn justification. He is more interested in appearances, in impressing other Christians that he is devoted, pious, serious, all-out for God. He says, "I am deeply religious - and everybody ought to see it!"

We see this in the Jewish Talmudic writers' list of seven classes of Pharisees. Among these classes were:

- * The Shechemites. These Pharisees said long prayers in public to be considered holy - but on the side they robbed widows of their estates!
- * The Stumblers. These were so mock-humble they wouldn't dare lift their feet before a holy God. Instead, they shuffled along with a "poor, humble, insignificant me" attitude.
- * The Bleeders. This group would not lift their eyes from the ground, lest they look at something evil. They got their name from constantly walking into walls; the more they bled, the holier they were!

Beloved, these types are in every church! They have a sad, serious, "holy" look. Some of them dare not raise their hands to praise God - nor clap and be happy or joyful! They think of themselves as "shut in with God," holy, above everybody else. They sit in "deep meditation," their lips moving, lost in the Spirit. Yet "all their works they do for to be seen of men" (Matthew 23:5).

God Has Lovingly Reminded Me
of Some of My Legalistic Games!

Last year, Gwen and I spent a vacation at a Florida hotel with some dear friends, a couple from Texas, Dr. and Mrs. Rice. We all had spent the week seeing Disney World, and now we just wanted to relax. As we stood in the lobby of the hotel, Gwen suggested we go to the Rices' room to play dominoes.

Now, I know the Rices have always considered me to be a righteous man - and I figured I didn't want to blow it! I realized that during the week our friends hadn't once seen me retreat to pray. I thought, "How am I supposed to be holy in front of these people if I don't go pray?"

So I told them, "I'm sorry, I can't play dominoes. I need to go in my room and touch God. You all go ahead and play."

But do you know what I was really saying? "I don't have time to waste, like you poor earthlings! You worldly minded ones go and tinkle around with dominoes. This prophet is going to shut himself in with God!"

(I ask you: How can you relax at playing dominoes when you know that someone like that is nearby, "pleading with God"?)

When I got to our room it was about eight o'clock. I thought, "I'll watch just a half hour of CNN News - then I'll pray." One hour of news later, CNN announced an upcoming documentary on the rise and fall of Hitler. I quickly reasoned, "That has to do with prophecy - I have to see it!"

At a quarter to ten, I'd already seen Hitler rise and fall - when I heard Gwen coming down the hall!

I jumped up, ran to the TV, shut it off, turned out the light - and fell on my face in the dark at the foot of the bed!

When Gwen walked in she saw her devoted prophet husband getting up slowly from his holy position - piously acting as if he had been in prayer for two hours. I looked up meekly, rubbing my eyes, and said to Gwen, "Oh, honey, isn't the Lord good?"

I hope you can laugh at this as loudly as our congregation did when I shared it in my sermon! But, more importantly, I hope you laugh at it hard enough to drive the truth down into your soul: We all play games. trying to maintain a facade of holiness before people! I had to maintain my image of a holy man - and that is legalism at its worst!

The fact is, people who truly have the righteousness of the Lord don't have to put on airs. They are common, ordinary folks who know how to weep and laugh and enjoy Jesus and the fellowship of the saints. They are involved in other people's burdens and needs - and they're not always "shut away," trying to maintain an image!

We all look at appearances - but God sees the heart! We each need to come down from our high horse of pretentious holiness - to be honest and ourselves, the way we know God sees us. That is the only way to enjoy true fellowship with Him and with each other!

Re: A Look At Legalism - posted by moreofHim (), on: 2004/8/30 11:12

I am going to be transparent here because I for one am guilty of some of this and I see my need to repent.

Quote:

-----But do you know what I was really saying? "I don't have time to waste, like you poor earthlings! You worldly minded ones go and tinkle around with dominoes. This prophet is going to shut himself in with God!"-----

I am not saying that being shut away with God is prideful- but that we want others to "see" that.

I know in my walk with the Lord these last few years, I have struggled because of my new found surrender and growth and knowledge of the truth. I know some people including my relatives have thought I was over the deep end- so to restore the "self" in their eyes, or prove my "new found holiness" I would make sure that they saw my devotion to Him. I see that it was for their eyes and that I was having to try to prove myself. Even though I was justifying that it would show them "why" I was different- it was really just pride.

It also reminds me of that parable about the pharisee and the tax collector "Oh, thank you that I am not like that sinner". So I would try to show on the outside that I was not like these "sinners" (or lukewarm Christians).

I should know that the Lord will show Himself to people through me by my heart attitudes. My servanthood, my love, my forgiveness, my truth, my surrender. It is up to Him to "prove" me- if and when and how He wants to.

A fellow traveler, Chanin

Re: - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2004/8/30 11:18

Quote:

-----Beloved, these types are in every church! They have a sad, serious, "holy" look. Some of them dare not raise their hands to praise God - nor clap and be happy or joyful! They think of themselves as "shut in with God," holy, above everybody else.-----

Yes there are times when it's hard for me to loosen up in some ways and praise God and serve men. There are tendencies in any calling from God to start to take it too far in the flesh rather than allowing God by His spirit to burden you at specific times and at others give you seasons of joy, etc. This is a great topic Chanin because many have weird views of the word legalism.

One thing that worries me is people who will shy away from any whole-hearted dedication to God calling it legalism. I believe we should strive harder to serve God in the spirit than we ever strived to serve sin in the past life. And to tell you the truth I strived quite hard for the master of sin doing much damage to myself and others in the world. I pray I am serving God with even more zeal and strength every moment of my life.

Re: - posted by Gideons (), on: 2004/8/30 20:50

My fear is that any discussion of holiness somehow implies legalism. I believe that's a common misconception by many believers.

At the root of this lack of holiness is pride (i.e. lack of surrender) and unbelief. We don't surrender because we don't want to lose control. If I told a small child not to walk across the street because traffic was coming would I be a legalistic father? I don't think so.

As far as unbelief, we believe that Christ conquered sin through his death and resurrection. If Jesus conquered sin and the grave, then we achieve victory in this life (not just when we die physically) but when we die spiritually.

Just some rambling thoughts for what they're worth....

Re: legalism - posted by moreofHim (), on: 2004/8/30 21:10

Greg said:

Quote:

-----One thing that worries me is people who will shy away from any whole-hearted dedication to God calling it legalism.

Ed said:

Quote:

-----My fear is that any discussion of holiness somehow implies legalism.

Both are so true. Whenever you mention holiness or anything that disagrees with the way the church has ok'd the ways of the world (divorce, going after your own dreams, hanging onto your rights, sueing people,- things that the bible is all p retty clear on) they say you are judgemental and legalistic.

Quote:

-----We don't surrender because we don't want to lose control.

This is one of the most eye-opening statements. Most people have no idea that they have any "control" issues. I didn't th ink I was controlling in any way- until someone asked me- "do you try to control your life circumstances? Do you try to co ntrol your environment? Do try to control the way people perceive you, how much they actually see the real you?" Yes, I did all of these things.

This statement opens up a whole can of worms- but it needs to be dealt with.

In Him, Chanin

Re: - posted by Paulus (), on: 2004/11/5 11:16

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paul