



Legalism

By Jeff Bedwell on March 7, 2022

TODAY'S READING: Galatians 1

Galatians is a letter written by the apostle Paul specifically to counter tendencies toward legalism and to address the centrality of the gospel of grace in the new church in an area of the world then called Galatia. Its message is still relevant to believers today.

What is legalism? If we are not careful, we can label almost anything legalism, especially if we do not agree with it or do not like the restrictions it seems to be placing upon us. Not everything labeled “legalism” is truly legalism.

Legalism can be described as seeking to earn God’s favor by working in our own strength according to our own rules. This is a performance-based faith. The Judaizers of Paul’s day were teaching that obedience to God’s law (specifically the Old Testament law), was the way to earn God’s favor and assure a right standing before God. It was Jesus plus some sort of performance on our part, basically saying that what Jesus did was not enough on its own.

Legalism often shows forth in various ways, as it did in the Pharisees of Jesus’ day. First, it tends to focus on external behaviors more than the condition of one’s heart. Secondly, legalism often focuses on the behavior of others instead of the spiritual condition of my own heart. It is much easier to “police” others’ behavior than to deal with the dark places in our own hearts. Thirdly, legalism tends to elevate human tradition (which is doable in our own strength) to the level of God’s clear commands in scripture.

The antidote to the life-sucking trap of legalism is the gospel of grace. “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen*” (Galatians 1:3–5, ESV). The gospel of Jesus Christ is that Jesus “paid it all.” **The gospel is free** – it cannot be earned or deserved. **The gospel is freeing** – it rescues us from the enslaving power of sin in the “here and now” of this present evil age. The gospel sets us free to be who God created and called us to be and do those things that bring life, healing, and wholeness as we increasingly live our lives aligned with God’s design as revealed in His commands. This is truly “good news!”

We are set free by Christ’s power to live according to God’s wise and loving design for our lives. We are not to try to **earn** God’s love and favor but **rest in** His love and favor that has already been poured out upon us in Jesus Christ. This is truly life-altering good news that we increasingly want to remind ourselves of and live in every single day!

Like Paul, let us vigorously reject any hint of legalism in our relationship with God or others (vv. 6-9). Let us live more and more in the complete freedom, acceptance and transforming power

of the gospel of Jesus Christ!

PRAYER: *Father, graciously show me any areas of my life where legalism has a grip on my thinking, actions or relationships with You or others. Help me to repent of this “false gospel” and depend fully on the freeing and transforming work of Jesus Christ on my behalf.*

TOMORROW'S READING: Galatians 2

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