

Series: Legalism. License. Liberty!
Message Title: **The Curse of Legalism**
Date: Sunday, October 1, 2017
Scripture: Galatians 2:4-19
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Introduction

Acting is both an artistic gift and a crafty illusion. Many think they know actors and actresses based on their characters when, in fact, the real person may be nothing like the hero, heroin, villain or rascal they portrait.

On the other hand, a good actor can make a character come alive and can become real in our imagination.

You can make a lot of money acting in the entertainment industry, but you can ruin a lot of lives acting in life, especially in the ministry.

In the study of the book of Galatians, we learn Paul's primary concern was over external practices and pretense. People to whom he had preached and led to faith were beginning to move from the gospel of grace to a long list of necessary works—external practices—that looked and sounded good,

but reflected a religious practice foreign to him.

Authenticity was replaced with hypocrisy. Reality was overshadowed by rituals. The church was embroiled in controversy, and division was growing.

Curiously, this was the first big controversy in the early church. It had to do with how faith and practice worked together. What practices validate faith and how does true faith reshape practices?

This was the first big battle and it resulted in a Church Council (a Summit) in Jerusalem.

“But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question... When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and

they declared all that God had done with them... The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe... But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will'" (Acts 15:1-2, 4, 6-7, 11 ESV).

The church flourished in Jerusalem, Antioch and throughout the ancient world.

The book of Acts provides a historical context for all of the New Testament. Each of the New Testament letters are set in the book of Acts.

In Galatians 1-2, Paul is refuting the claim that his gospel was different from the twelve—to the contrary, equal in authenticity and authority—"not man's gospel."

"Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation

and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (Galatians 2:1-5 ESV).

Paul goes back to Jerusalem and brings all this together.

It was not his gospel, but that of the Judaizers that was wrong, twisted and dissentious in the church. What were these spies teaching? Judaizers = Real Christians become good Jews!

Jewish legalism was overshadowing freedom in Christ. It was a morality based on both legal and ceremonial rituals rather than spiritual authenticity through growth in grace.

In Christianity, the term, *legalism*, refers to (1) requiring works for salvation, which is the opposite of *sola fide* (faith alone). (2) emphasizing a system of rules and regulations for achieving spiritual growth. This is derived from the legal system of commandments, ordinances, and regulations contained in the Mosaic Law.

Paul would have nothing to do with it for several reasons:



- **Legalism brings personal bondage and guilt on us.**

“Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (Galatians 2:4-5 ESV).

Paul was a freedom fighter; he did not want a group of Jewish leaders “Judaizing” these

Galatian believers. In particular, should they be circumcised?

“But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek” (Galatians 2:3 ESV).

Circumcision was one of many prescribed practices of Judaism. It was purposeful in heritage and history, but not a priority for Gentiles—(but Jews) certain ceremonies, dress a certain way, pray at certain times, eat or not eat certain foods, etc.

Could the Gentiles be saved?

“And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John,

who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do" (Galatians 2:6-10 ESV).

This 95-word sentence seems rather erratic at first. It begins by simply stating that Peter, James and John (special three in the Garden of Gethsemane) had no problem with Paul's gospel and affirmed the common nature of preaching—offering the right hand of fellowship. However, some may have thought Paul stumbled by making the point that God has no favorites.

The gospel is equal in relevance, impact and freedom upon all of us. There is not a "hierarchy of the holy". You don't get holier the higher you climb in performance or practice.

There is room for varied expressions of our faith in practice. Today we would never say you must speak English to be saved.

There is positional and practical freedom, and standing before God in the truth of the gospel. It can be indigenous in every race, culture and homeland. Fried chicken is the “gospel bird” in Georgia, but it might be fresh fish in Spain or something else in Cuba. This is called *contextualization* in mission and ministry, not compromise!

Why is this important? We all tend toward personal imposition and cultural imperialism in ministry—look like us, talk like us, sing like us, dress like us.

“If you are TRUE, you will do it like we do”—right behaviors with wrong motivations or beliefs.

I am talking about a surrender to Lordship and conforming obedience to Christ without imposing preferences, traditions, the extras and the lists we want to place on others before we accept and affirm them in the gospel.

It is vital for us to seek biblical unity, not cultural conformity. There are differences in race, education, class, language and culture.

Our goal is not to unify these but to be united through the blood and by the Book!

I have a hunch some of you could attest that many of your struggles in faith and growth had to do with hearing and repeating what others said you “had to do” to be spiritual, at least until you were clear on the gospel!

This was true throughout Church history (world of Luther and other reformers)—go to confession, pray through Mary, purchase indulgences, attend services, take communion, etc.. . salvation is in the Church! No! We’re the light house, not the life boat! (Reformation: *sola gracia* = *Grace alone*; *sola fide* = *faith alone*)

Today, we tend toward allowing our spiritual disciplines define our spirituality. For example, “I am spiritual if I have a one-hour quiet time, eat tofu or go vegan for God, commit to one-a-day witness, give to a cause of justice, sponsor a child in need, attend a particular Bible study or participate in a particular discipleship group.”

I'm not saying spiritual discipline is not important, but we must be sure our efforts to look and be spiritual are not more important than Christ's work for us. We stand in grace.

For others, there are certain activities that are spiritual while others are carnal. You can be spiritual at church, but you are carnal if you watch a movie, go to a play, or cheer wildly at a ballgame!

Or you are spiritual when you are with only Christians (friends, work, etc.), but you are defiled if you hang out with unbelievers. Mood ring! Jesus was often accused of hanging out with sinners. I'm not saying you should become like the world, but you understand, there is a reason you are in the world—to be a witness, not a Pharisee!

Finally, do you go on a guilt trip every time you fall or fail the Lord? "I've got to read my Bible for an hour. I've got to go pray for a day. I've got to go..." I'm not minimizing any sin or failure, but I want to be clear:

"But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another,

and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:7-9 ESV).

Your feelings don't define you. Christ's work defines you. Legalism has many bond slaves, but it is the gospel truth that frees us from guilt and seizes us to live for the glory of God.

Every reformation in church history has brought people back to a less encumbered spirituality by recovering the purity and promise of Christ's work for us.

"Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you" (Galatians 2:4-5 ESV).

“In like manner do we offer to the papists all that is to be offered, yea, and more than we ought. Only we except the liberty of conscience which we have in Christ Jesus. For we will not suffer our conscience to be bound to any work so that by doing this thing, or that, we should be righteous, or leaving the same undone, we should be damned... For the matter which we have in hand is weighty and of great importance, even touching the death of the Son of God, who by the will and commandment of the Father was made flesh, was crucified, and died for the sins of the world. If faith in Him here give place, then is this death and resurrection of the Son of God in vain; it is but a fable that Christ is the Savior of the world. Our stoutness then in this godly and holy, for by it we seek to keep our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, and thereby to retain the truth of the gospel; which if we lose then we do also lose God, Christ all the promises, faith, righteousness and everlasting life.” —Martin Luther

• **Legalism leads to public hypocrisy and shame with others.**

“But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood

condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?'" (Galatians 2:11-14 ESV).

Talk about drama at church! Paul rebukes Peter. Why? Hypocrisy.

In the Greek/Roman Culture, *hypocrites* were the actors. They would wear a mask to become another character. Peter was wearing a mask. He helped to gather and lead the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. He signed on to affirm salvation without circumcision and law keeping, but when Peter violated this verdict, he condemned himself.

Fear, rather than conviction, often dictates action.

When you see policeman on a roadway, is your sudden reaction to obey the speed limit? . . . maybe something you had no interest or concern about obeying moments earlier? Just soarin'.

Legalism is a quickened, outward compliance to Law without the inward commitment to Law.

You can have orthodoxy without integrity. You can appear right and be wrong. Greed, immorality, dissension. We often do things to please or deceive others, but not from conviction or a motivation to obey God.

Paul was worried about a personality cult and a two-tiered faith. Peter and Paul, Jews and Gentiles: guard against "holier than thou" attitudes, actions and activities.

To this end, Paul provided accountability to Peter:

"But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned" (Galatians 2:11 ESV).

God uses others to hold us in account for our words and actions. Acts 11 (Cornelius) “Don’t call unclean,” but then Peter was a chameleon. Peter’s great weakness throughout Scripture is that of seeking approval of men... and it’s often true of us!

Paul pointed Peter and the churches back to the gospel!

- **Legalism smacks at presumptive manipulation with God.**

“We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God” (Galatians 2:15-19 ESV).

Wrong thinking about the Law = I can use the Law to justify my standing before God.

Right thinking about the Law = to see my need as something greater than I can achieve or accomplish.

The Law is simply a tool of measure to show us how far we really are from God and how much we need His grace to save us.

“Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Galatians 3:21-22 ESV).

Manipulation = “Abracadabra”—say the right words, go through the right motions and somehow we can gain favor with God through our performance.

Then, if we gain favor, we will secure blessing, we will avoid suffering, we will receive extras, we will be a better person, and we will have rewards.

“The modern manipulation of God is extremely subtle, but the heart of it lies in a kind of evangelical humanism. God is looked upon as existing to serve my ends; not I existing to serve God’s ends... Do I pray, attend church and tithe my income in order to receive special favors, or do I do those things out of realizing who God is and for the joy of obeying the majestic, glorious God of the universe? Do I seek to please Him in order that my loved one may be healed, or is it because I love Him so much I could not do otherwise? Do I write for ‘my gain’ or for ‘God’s glory’ underneath everything I do for Him?”—Glyn Evans, *Daily With the King*

How we respond has everything to do with determining manipulation and worship. Legalism seeks to in-debt God to us through our performance, but liberty in Christ frees us to serve and live for the glory of God alone.

We are justified by faith in Christ Jesus. The word, *justified*, appears four times in Galatians v.16-17.

“Justification is the favorable verdict of God, the righteous Judge, that one who formerly

stood condemned has now been granted a new status at the bar of divine justice.”

—Timothy George

“Justification is the gracious act of God by which God declares a sinner righteous solely through faith in Jesus Christ.” —Platt and Merida

“I died to the Law, so that I might live to God” (Galatians 2:19 ESV). The Law had fulfilled its purpose in leading Paul to Christ that he might live in union with the resurrected Christ—new power, purpose, authority and identity—to live a life truly, authentically and wholly devoted to God FREE from the curse of legalism and the law of transgressions.