

Legalism is Lethal in the Spiritual Life

Introduction

Legalism is like pride—it makes everybody sick except the one who has it. We find it easy to see in others but quite difficult to see in ourselves. Often the Christian response to legalism is to view it like a cold since almost everyone suffers from it, we don't understand what it is or how to cure it, and we find it to be very highly contagious. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to liken it to allergies. Like many I suffer greatly from allergies and require two shots every three weeks. I know that others suffer from “snuffing, sniffing, sneezing, coughing and wheezy breathing” (sounds like a jingle for Allerest™). Legalism can be very much like that. It comes upon you and you hardly know what has happened. The symptoms simply and suddenly appear, and you and the people around you know it.¹

Definition

Legalism is keeping man-made rules and regulations in order to earn God's acceptance for salvation or sanctification. The Christian's favorite is the Ten Commandments which were God-given enduring principles of right and wrong.² But simply keeping those requirements does not in any way grant or guarantee salvation. The rich young ruler who claimed to have kept all the law was introduced to this fact by our Lord (Luke 18:18-27). In our modern day how much less will the keeping of dress codes, hair length, food intake, or entertainment guidelines fall short of earning our salvation? Yet it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that what we do or avoid doing will earn or merit a place for us in God's kingdom, let alone His favor.

The word “legalism”, like the word “trinity”, does not occur in the Bible yet both are concepts we often employ. However, unlike trinity, which is taught in principle in the Scriptures, legalism is not. Legalism is a term Evangelical Christians use to describe a certain doctrinal position or practice that emphasizes a system of rules and regulations in achieving either salvation or spiritual growth. For some, strict literal adherence to those rules and regulations is demanded to achieve both justification and sanctification. But in all ways, rules without relationship lead to rebellion. Theologically it is a position completely opposed to the concept of grace. Frequently those who hold a legalistic position fail to see the real purpose for law, especially the purpose of the Old Testament Law of Moses for the Church which was, according to the Apostle Paul, a

¹ I am indebted to my former pastor and friend, Dr. Ray Stedman. His sermons, books and private conversations to me as a young man seeking to grow in the Christian life have provided much of the foundation of this essay. I have adapted many of his principles and teachings in this paper.

² More technically the text says the “words” not commandments. The numeration of the commandments has been long disputed. Jews see vs. 1-2 speaking to the first word in that it must assume that there is a God. They also hold that :3-6 are the second commandment or word. All other words flow from this assumption. Roman Catholics group vs. 3-6 together and count them as the first commandment. They divide :17 into two commandments that gives a total of ten. Most protestants use :3 to be the first commandment, :4-6 the second and :17 to refer to the tenth.

“schoolmaster” or “tutor” and “guide” to bring us to Christ. As Paul wrote, “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). Hence he could also affirm in dogmatic fashion that “by works of the law shall no man be justified” (Galatians 2:16, 3:11).³

Legalism is any man-made system, set of rules, mandated expectations, or regulations that promise that God will give acceptance and approval in return for, or as a reward for, human effort and obedience. This does not nullify the doctrine of rewards that is clearly taught in the Bible concerning Bema Seat theology (II Cor. 5:9 Rom 14:10, I John 2:28). But reward for faithful service demands not only the right actions but also the right attitude as we will see later. Legalism is a spiritually toxic virus unique to humans, spread by man’s vain attempt to earn favor from God through religious activity, and is best treated by God’s unconditional and amazing grace.

Types of Legalism

The Bible speaks unequivocally concerning our freedom and liberty which is ours in Christ by grace. However, Christian liberty is not the freedom to do whatever one likes; it is the liberty one experiences when at salvation he is delivered from the bondage of sin and is now free to be conformed to the image of Christ. Paul clearly advocated voluntary Christian discipline rather than either a legalized code of behavior or the freedom to do as one pleases.⁴ When speaking of Christian liberty, Paul qualifies the freedom by calling the Christian, in exercising his liberty, to be sensitive to those about him/her (the “weaker brother” of Romans 14,15).

It is imperative that the Christian understand that legalism is one of the favorite weapons of the enemy. The devil uses legalism because this will destroy the joy of the believer’s life under the

³ The meaning of “works of the law” has been a bone of contention for many years in the evangelical world. The discussion first started in the liberal wing of Christianity but moved to the evangelical section as a response was mandated. Under the influence of Luther in his commentary on Galatians (*Luther’s Works*, 26:148 ff) he contrived the idea that Paul was against works of the law and the form of Judaism that promoted a works religion/works salvation. This was followed by major works by Sanday and Heedlam in their commentary on A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (ICC), (T.T. Clark). Rudolf Bultman carried this theme as well in his work Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting (1949). This view was challenged by Jewish scholar C.G. Montefiore. He contended that Paul was only reacting against a Hellenized form of Judaism. This view was followed by G.F. Moore in Rabbinic Theology (1927) and W.D. Davis, Paul and Rabbinic Judaism, p. 221ff. The issue took a turn for the modern church under the influence of E.P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism (1977). This was refined and adjusted somewhat by the voluminous works of J.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright. In this view Paul was not railing against Judaism, per se, but only a portion of teaching that was seen in the Jews who had been Hellenized in culture and theology. Hence for Paul, Jews were saved not by works of the law but by covenant (covenantal nomism) and that they stayed saved and in the covenant by works. This essentially results in the assurance offered by Roman Catholic theology that states that salvation is secured as long as works continue and grace is added. In both Covenantal nomism and Roman Catholicism there is no room for “presumptuous assurance”. This new perspective on Paul as it has come to be understood by Dunn has been hotly debated and is losing its influence. See Justification edited by Husbands and Treier (IVP, 2004), Justification and Variegated Nomism, Vol. 2 edited D.A. Carson, Peter O’Brien and Mark Seifrid (Baker Books, 2004). Also see Vol. 1 of the same series and Paul and the New Perspective by Seyoon Kim (Eerdmans, 2002) for a clear rebuttal to this theological issue in Pauline studies.

⁴ I Cor. 9:27: “I beat my body and make it my slave lest possibly after I have preached to others I myself might be disqualified.”

direction of the Holy Spirit and the vitality of his or her experience in the Christian life. What is worse is that the devil will also use such a person to harm others as illustrated in the Church in the region of Galatia. These people had experienced the preaching ministry of Paul and had started so strong in their life of faith (Gal. 1:1-2; 3:1-4). Paul was genuinely enthusiastic about this group of growing young believers. But soon there came word that these young believers had given into another voice and another gospel that Paul said was not really the gospel at all. In fact it was a false gospel for justification and a false means of sanctification. It has turned these people from a vibrant life in the Spirit to a debilitating and dangerous life under the leadership of the flesh.

Make no mistake—legalism destroys! Rules without relationship lead to rebellion. It did so in the first century of the church and it will today in the 21st century. This is a philosophical and theological perspective that is devastating in its destructive power. The legalistic spirit destroys spiritual vitality while promising the participant that they are engaged in orthodoxy. But it is not “true Christianity” because Christ is not at the center. It appears to be evangelical because it uses terminology like “evangelism,” “fundamentalism,” “biblical literalism,” and “obedience to Christ”. These slogans sound good and appear to be biblical, but upon a closer look Christ is not the center, and the theology is not sound. It is a false, counterfeit, spurious system which exalts man and elicits anger from God.

If legalism is “false Christianity” it is imperative that we know what true Christianity is all about. Like the agents at the US treasury are trained to recognize true bills which will allow them to spot the counterfeit, so also we need to know what “true” Christianity is. My first pastor, Ray Stedman called this, “Authentic Christianity”.⁵ Let me paraphrase for you his understanding. Authentic or true Christianity is to manifest genuinely Christ-like behavior by means of dependence on the working of the Spirit of God within, motivated by a love for the glory and honor of God.

You will notice that Dr. Stedman lists three essential elements. Without all three Christianity can become legalism.

The first aspect is an expected pattern of behavior. There is a law or a code, to which we are expected to conform. Unfortunately many Christians make the mistake of thinking that to be free from legalism you must become free from any and all law. Nothing is further from the truth. The Scriptures never endorse that notion. It is the privilege of every Christians to sing, “Free from the Law, O happy condition - Jesus hath bled, and there is remission,” but what we are talking about is not freedom from all Law but freedom from the curse of the Law code of the Mosaic Covenant. That is something quite different.

I believe that the law—by which I mean the Mosaic economy as a whole—is no longer in force for Christians. It has no soteriological role to play in justification. It is also not the means for sanctification as the “rule of life”. (Dr. Louis Berkhof understands the law is a rule of life for believers, reminding them of their duties and leading them in the way of life and salvation.⁶) Let me put it both theologically and pastorally: we are not under the Old Covenant, we are under the

⁵ See Dr. Stedman’s book Authentic Christianity (Discovery House Publishers, 1996).

⁶ See Louis Berkhof’s Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1939).

New Covenant. We are introduced into this New Covenant relationship with God by an act of grace. The new heart (Hebrews 8) is imparted to us by a supernatural work of regeneration (Titus 3:5), and our standing in this covenant is thus permanent and unconditional (Luke 22 and I Cor 11).

However, God's gracious act, by which we come under the New Covenant, obligates us with many responsibilities. The failure to perform these does not nullify the covenantal relationship itself (eternal security is a biblical doctrine—John 10, Eph 1, Rom 8) but, as the author of Hebrews clearly warns us, this failure can expose us to severe divine discipline and the loss of reward at the Bema seat (i.e., II Cor. 5:9-10; Rom 14:10).

Born-again Christians are responsible to keep the commandments left by our Lord Jesus Christ and by His apostles conveyed in the writings of the NT. This new array of commands is quite distinct from the Mosaic economy and should never be confused with it. Though we are not under the Law of Moses in any way, we can say with Paul that we are “under the law of Christ” (I Cor 9:21). However, since we are under the New Covenant, this law is inscribed on our hearts (Heb 8:10; Jer 31-33), and every act of obedience is the natural outworking of what we are inwardly due to our position and identity with Jesus (Rom. 5:12; Eph 5:22). That is why James can call it “the law of liberty” (Jas 1:25; 2:12). It is the free expression of what we are by nature as God's children. The redeemed self, our “new man”, “was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24).⁷

The world we live in is a law-governed universe.⁸ This is due to the fact that the law reflects the character of God. But that is not to say that the Mosaic system of law was to redeem man. It was to reveal the holiness of God and regulate the affairs of men.

⁷ The preceding concept of the relation of the Old and New Covenant is from Zane Hodges “Legalism. The Real Thing,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* Vol. 9:17 (Autumn 1996).

⁸ A Christian should study the Old Covenant since it was and is and for all time will be the inspired word of God. II Timothy 3:16 says: “*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; (17) so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*” To Timothy, “all Scripture” meant the Old Testament plus whatever was available of the New Testament in his day. This is not easy to determine. However, it appears that by the time Paul penned II Timothy, the New Testament books of James, Galatians, I and II Thessalonians, Mark, I and II Corinthians, Romans, Luke, Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, Philemon, Acts, Matthew, I Timothy, I Peter, and Titus had all been written (Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible, New American Standard Translation*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1978, page 1440).

The letter of First Timothy had reached Timothy since he was the addressee. Because Timothy was a close friend of Paul, it would not be unreasonable to suggest or assume that he probably had access to some or all of Paul's previous writings. A portion of Luke 10:7 is quoted in I Timothy 5:18.

Therefore it would not be necessary or correct to say that since II Timothy 3:16 refers to the Old Testament, a Christian must still be under the law and the Mosaic Covenant. Instead, the Law must be seen in the context of the Old Testament *and* what was available of the New Testament. By this time it contained enough of the Scriptures listed above to teach that the New Covenant was activated at the time of our Lord's crucifixion, and that the New Covenant replaced the Old. This is not to say that there is no future aspect of the New Covenant that waits for Israel's fulfillment. It is clearly announced to the nation that there is a bright future that has yet to come about (Jer. 31-33). This aspect of the covenant awaits a future fulfillment as explained by Paul in Romans 11. The Church does not replace the promised to Israel. I Peter 1:6-10 does not indicate the promise for Israel is subsumed in the church. This is functioning as an illustration and application for the church similar to exegetical techniques of the first century. See Longenecker's *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2d ed. (Eerdmans, 1999). The New Covenant promise is also not abrogated by Galatians 3:25-29. Christians are in the seed which is Christ and therefore spiritual offspring of Abraham. But this does not cancel out the physical and ethnic promise to Israel. Hence the church

The second necessary element according to Dr. Stedman's definition is a sufficient and adequate power. (Remember his concept of authentic Christianity: authentic or true Christianity is to manifest genuinely Christ-like behavior by means of dependence on the working of the Spirit of God within, motivated by a love for the glory and honor of God.)

This is the crucial point of the gospel. All religions promise power, but they do not ultimately and eternally deliver. The good news for us is preceded by the bad news about us. All have sinned and the wages of sin is death (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). But God has given us the good news as well.⁹ He has redeemed and reconciled us through the power of the resurrection. But better still, at least for us, is that God has given us a sufficient and adequate power, indwelling us, available to us at all times. Hence, we never have an excuse for not being and becoming conformed to His image. As we operate in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, indwelling us, we have a sufficient and adequate power both for justification and for sanctification.¹⁰

The third essential according to Stedman is a motive which moves us to action -- a powerful, compelling hunger for the glory of God. This is an urge that God be honored and glorified. The Westminster Catechism states that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. This is built off of Psalm 16:8, "I have set the Lord always before me therefore my heart is glad." For the believer in Jesus Christ the motive derived from the mandate is to see God honored, exalted and extolled. We are to ascribe to Him the Glory due His name. This attitude is seldom reflected in modern worship services that are long on style but short on substance. The focus seems to be on technique and fails to proclaim the truth about our great God and produce glory for Him.¹¹

The Christian life is fulfilling the spirit of the law (Godly Character) by means of a unique power (Holy Spirit) because of an overwhelming desire (Motive). It requires a standard or code of behavior, an inward power which makes it possible to achieve it, and a motive which drives us on to do so.

participates in the New Covenant due to the fact that it is Jesus, who not only is the King of Israel and will fulfill the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenant, but also He is head of the Church which allows the Church to participate in its present blessing (as Paul states in I Cor 11 built off of the words of Jesus in Luke 22) as the nation of Israel awaits its future and final form or fulfillment. It is to be remembered that Paul called his fellow apostles "ministers of a new covenant" (II Cor 3:6), not ministers of the Old Covenant. The Apostle Paul, if he was the author of the book of Hebrews also placed a curse on Christians of his day who tried to remain under the Old Covenant:

"How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the [new] covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace (Hebrews 10:29-31)." Nevertheless, regardless of the severity, the Old Covenant is profitable to Christians when used or understood correctly. The Old Covenant provides some important information to the doctrines of the Trinity, angels, man, sin, future events, and so forth. It also provides the history and the sociological and theological need that leads up to the sacrifice of our Lord and the institution of the New Covenant. The Law is good, if one uses it properly (I Tim 1:8).

⁹ See Evan Tell Ministries and Dr. Larry Moyer for the evangelistic approach containing "the good news and bad news" style.

¹⁰ See Eph 5:18 and Gal 5:16 for an example of the power that Paul understood to be the Christians from the Spirit.

¹¹ It is important to check our motives for why we go to church and the manner in which we worship the Lord.

Becoming a Christian is by a simple act of faith. It requires faith alone in Christ alone and it is by God's grace alone. However, you cannot manifest or magnify genuine Christianity without a standard of behavior, the power of the Spirit and the motive to glorify God alone. If it fails at any one point it immediately becomes legalism.

The Wrong Mandate

Let me explain these three elements and how they manifest themselves in the Christian life. First, there is a form of legalism that employs the wrong standard as its measure. This form of legalism makes unwarranted or unnecessary demands on yourself and others. This is most pronounced in areas which are not prohibited or proscribed in the Scriptures. There are other areas in which we are given a great deal of personal liberty, and it is legalism to make standards (particularly for someone else) in these areas. Here we must be careful, because, for ourselves, it is proper to set standards or rules which apply to us. If I have difficulty with a specific social situation, or I discover a weakness within myself, it is wise to make a rule for my own protection. This is not legalism but discipline, wisdom, and prudence on my part. It is not to make God like me or to save myself in His sight.

Suppose I decide, "I will not go to bars because my family history includes a problem with alcohol. I personally have a weakness toward alcohol. I often tend to lose control and get high or even drunk, therefore I won't go there." That may be a perfectly proper rule for your life. It is right to set these kinds of rules and limitations upon yourself. Is that legalism? Of course it is not. It is wise self-imposed discipline to protect you from sin and from yourself. As you grow as a believer you will be able to change some rules or guidelines that you needed earlier in your Christian life.

But this can easily become legalism when you make a list of rules for others and demand that God desires them to follow your list that is not clearly found in the Scriptures.

Stedman gives us an imaginative look at a biblical situation:

The Corinthians wrote to Paul and asked, "What about these Christians who are eating meat offered to idols?" Some of them were upset about this and they wrote to the apostle, saying, "We don't think that is right; to us that is demon worship." But Paul wrote back and said in effect, "It would be the easiest thing in the world for me, as an apostle, simply to say, 'Yes, you are right, don't eat meat offered to idols,' but I am not going to say that. What I am going to say is that here is an area where each man must be fully persuaded in his own mind. You can't make rules for each other, and you have to honor a weaker brother's conscience. If he is troubled by a certain action then don't flaunt your liberty in his presence, but be careful of one another and love each other."¹²

As Camu stated, "Freedom is the great curse on man." So also T.S. Elliot understood our weakness and said, "Man can not bear much reality." For the believer there will always be situations that demand a response. Frequently the Scriptures are not clear or they are silent concerning a given situation that we experience. These are areas in which we are left free to be

¹² Stedman, Legalism.

guided by our conscience and instructed by the Word of God in general principles if not by specific precepts. We at times are called upon to counsel one another and help one another, but we are not to legislate or demand when the Scriptures do not speak to the issue. We dare not create standards or rules that are beyond the Scriptures. As Calvin said, “We must go as far as the Scriptures but no farther.”

The Wrong Method

A second form of legalism, which is similar though it takes another form, has to do with the power upon which you rely in order to behave. Legalism can include the proper biblical demands, nevertheless, in relying on the wrong source of power to accomplish the demand you in fact function as a legalist. This type of legalism operates under the code of the Bible that is authorized -- thou shall not murder, thou shall not steal, thou shall not lie, or stop lying to one another stop stealing from one another -- a moral code which is approved of in the Scriptures. But even in that area it is wrong to make a demand upon someone who doesn't understand the power by which it is to be met. It becomes legalism since they will inevitably turn to their own resources: i.e., the flesh.

The actual external behavior can be the same in the case of a legalist or of one behaving as an authentic Christian. Both can be “real” Christians, and their behavior may be exactly the same, but one is legalistic and the other is not. It all depends on what is going on inside in terms of the means to fulfill the mandate, on what a person is relying on to accomplish the demand or command. It is summed up by Paul in Galatians 5:16. The choice is to operate in the flesh or the Spirit. The challenge is to walk in the Spirit and not fulfill the lust of the flesh. The two power sources are in opposition to each other. If you are reckoning or relying on anything other than the activity of the Spirit of God at work in you, you are a legalist and Paul would add “foolish”! This is what has been termed “The Flesh”. We will examine this concept later. But for now it is only necessary to understand that when we operate in the flesh we are essentially operating as a legalist in our method of living the “Christian life”. It is anything but the true freedom that Christ died to provide for mankind (Gal 5:1).¹³ Paul, in Romans 8:7-11, reveals that when we are operating according to the flesh we will experience death. But life and peace are ours when we live or operate according to the Spirit. This is the essence of the spiritual life, a life that Jesus

¹³ For works dealing with the flesh see David Needham, Birthright: Christian, Do You Know Who You Are? (Multnomah, 1999), and Robert Gundry, Soma in Biblical Theology (Zondervan, 1998). From a pastoral perspective Stedman says, “The flesh is the old life, the natural life inherited from Adam, with its apparent resources of personality, of ancestry, of commitment, of dedication, and so forth. You can do all kinds of religious things in the flesh. The flesh can preach a sermon. The flesh can sing in the choir. The flesh can act as an usher. The flesh can lead people to Christ. Did you know that? The flesh can go out and be very zealous in its witnessing and amass a terribly impressive list of people won to Christ, scalps to hang on a belt. The flesh can do these things but it is absolutely worthless. That is why, in any Christian activity, you have to be careful that your inner reliance is on God, and not on you. Otherwise it comes out all wrong and makes all the difference between heaven and hell, life and death. You can do exactly the same thing that someone else is doing, and, if you do it with a sense of reliance on anything other than the Spirit of God, what they do will bless people but what you do will curse them. It is the very same action, absolutely the same. What you do one moment, trusting in God's Spirit, will bless people and strengthen them and bless your own life and enrich and fulfill it, but the very next moment you can do exactly the same thing in the power of the flesh, and it will be damaging and destructive and hurtful to others and to you. That is why you need to recognize the subtlety of all this and to be aware that God looks not at the outward appearance, as man does, but at the inner heart. What is going on inside is all-important to God.”

died to provide for each of us. Jesus did not come out of curiosity or out of any personal need. The Father sent Him on an errand of mercy solely to accomplish our redemption. That redemption not only made a provision that justifies us but also provides the only power that can sanctify.¹⁴ To rely on any other power is religious hypocrisy and doomed to ultimate failure.

The Wrong Motive

The third aspect that can lead to legalism has to do with the motive you have for your actions. Legalism can contain in it the fulfilling of external requirements for reasons of self-exaltation or personal merit. This aspect of legalism is focusing on the “why” of what you do. You must be right in what you do (Commands), how you do it (in the Spirit or flesh), and why you do it (self or God's Glory).

Why do we do the things you do? Are we trying to build a reputation for ourselves? Do we want a reputation that we are “spiritual” Christians—and so we let it be known how many Bible verses we memorize each week, how many hours we spend in prayer, how often we go to church services, and how much we give to missions? It's like reading our resume to people so that they will know just how spiritual we are.¹⁵

That is a good picture of the religion of the Pharisees. Jesus is highlighting this type of attitude in the Sermon on the Mount. He points out that these men who love to be seen before men instead of being content to be visible only to the God and Father who sees in secret.¹⁶ If what is motivating you is a desire to gain preeminence, some prominence as a Christian, if you long to become the prima donna or peacock of the Christian list of “who's who” then you have

¹⁴ It is true that it takes to faith to sanctify. This is why Paul is so bothered at the Galatians who having started by faith in the grace of God wish to leave it to move on to Law keeping in the flesh. Paul's comment is that this is foolish. However the nature of faith has been mutated into a quasi work orientation that is assumed to be included in the formal definition. John Piper often conceives that the faith that justifies is the faith that sanctifies. Future Grace This is from the teaching of Daniel Fuller Unity of the Bible, and Norman Shepherd “The Grace of Justification” 1979 and “Thirty-Four Theses on Justification in Relation to Faith, Repentance and Good Works” 1978. Both men articulate that biblical faith must work. Fuller and Piper describe it as obedient faith or active faith. Hence if there is no work then there was no faith. Shepherd talks of justification coming about by faith and non-meritorious works. It seems to me that this is loading into the meaning of the word “faith” concepts that do fit. This was first done in the article on *pistis*- faith in TDNT by R. Bultmann. This added meaning has been added to the latest edition of BDAG. This additional nuance of faith would then demand that all Christians to be Christians must evidence faith working through love” (Piper commenting on Paul's use of the concept in Galatians) This theological view of the term faith would seem to discount the variety of warnings in the NT about growing weak in faith, shipwrecked in faith or overturned in faith. These seem to be addressed to Christians. Thomas Schriener deals with this issue by claiming the warnings in the NT addressed to the Christian is the way that God makes sure that Christian will respond. If they do not respond then they are in fact not Christians The Race Set before Us For a clearer understanding of the nature of faith see Gordon Clark's Faith and Saving Faith, Free and Clear by Larry Moyer and Absolutely Free by Z.C. Hodges. Also see J.E. Botha “The Meaning of *Pisteuo* in the Greek New Testament: A Semantic-Lexicographical Study” *Neotestamentica* 21 (1987):215-228 for an evaluation of lexical dictionaries and their procedural errors involving the inclusion of theological bias in lexical studies. This is built of James Barr's masterful work The Semantics of Biblical Language (1961).

¹⁵ see Rev.3 :14-21 for the danger of Christians displaying self sufficiency and Rev.3:1 for the danger of Christians desiring a reputation and not living out the reality.

¹⁶ Consult the Majority Text on Matt 6:4,6,18 to see the use of the term “openly” concerning the forms of Jewish practice. It seems that Jesus desired that they do their service in private and God would make it public or open to all in the kingdom.

jettisoned the motive that pleases God. This motivation is never clearly stated, but it is often what is on the inside. Did not Jesus call the Pharisees a white washed tomb? Their motive, and ours if it is the same, is not only distasteful it is demonic in its desire for approval and worship rooted in pride. It will end up producing death in your spiritual life and increase the shame or sham of your testimony for Christ.

A Corrosive Combination

Now it is possible to have a combination of these failures. You might find yourself transgressing in one or two areas of the three. If you are three for three then you are really a legalist. Your form of legalism can be overt or subtle. But both are known to God and deadly for you.

To put this all together—legalism is a mechanical and external behavior growing out of reliance on self, because of a desire to gain a reputation, display a skill, or satisfy an urge to personal power.

Any of the three are issues concerning legalism. At its base it is religious performance, meticulous in its outward form, effective to the eye of man, but inwardly, as Jesus described it, “filled with dead men’s bones,” (Matthew 23:27). It is self sufficiency, it is pride. As one has warned, “Don’t get too big for your britches for one day everything will come out in the end.” Pride comes in the form of trusting in your personality, background, training, and talent or skill instead of the Holy Spirit. Its motive in operating is for one’s own personal glory. That is full-blown legalism. I know that it does not seem like it, but at its base nature it is legalism that drives from and derives from pride. It both controls the methods and the motives we have to seek and win God over to acknowledge our goodness.

But in the end, and it is better if we know this at the beginning, we play the game and God keeps the score. For all our creativity and activity, God knows our heart.

Again Stedman insightfully warns, “That is why it needs constant evaluation on our part.” You can’t live the Christian life and never take a look at yourself. If you go on week after week, year after year, and fail to ask, “What kind of a Christian am I? Where am I before the Lord?” you cannot escape a legalistic spirit. We must always be asking, “What kind of attitudes do I manifest? What kind of disposition do I display to others?” You must ask these questions repeatedly. That is why the Scriptures say, “examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith,” (II Corinthians 13:5).”¹⁷

This is also the reason that we need to be in relationship with other Christians—small groups, men’s or women’s groups, accountability groups, or what ever you call it—we need each other to take a peek under the hood from time to time to see if we are manifesting a legalistic spirit. This is why both in church and in seminary we have mentors or spiritual directors to help us see what we can’t or won’t see on the inside.

¹⁷ I, unlike Stedman, believe this text is not to be used to determine if a person is a Christian since Paul was a Christian, and assumed the Corinthians were as well, as seen from his designation of them as saints twice in chapter 1. In both of the letters to Corinth he is asking to see if they are acting like saints. If they failed the test Paul was afraid that he would need to visit them and deal harshly (II Cor. 13:8-10)

I imagine that you may be wondering if you are a legalist. I doubt that anyone is a 100% legalist. We have the disease in degrees...we operate on a spectrum. Here is a field test I found that might help you consider if you are a legalist.

You might be a legalist if....

- 1) You feel you have to meet everyone's expectations and win the approval of your friends and family.
- 2) You are convinced that all moral and ethical issues are cut and dried -- gray areas are for people who are soft headed and soft hearted.
- 3) God's love depends on what you do.
- 4) You do not reflect on your motives for what you do in your spiritual exercise.
- 5) You think that you fall short because you didn't have enough faith, because your faith is not strong enough, because you haven't prayed enough, or because you need to be a better person.
- 6) You are convinced that God is predisposed to be angry with you, and that your main goal in life is to try to keep God happy by doing things that will impress Him.
- 7) Your spiritual life is defined and determined by an authoritative, charismatic leader or by a controlling physical organization, church, or group rather than a personal and direct relationship with God.
- 8) You tell your children not to do something in church or around church families that you allow in your home.
- 9) You believe that you are a member of the one true church and that all other Christians are sincere, but sincerely wrong and deceived.
- 10) You think a person's character can be determined by their clothing, hairstyle, piercings or tattoos.
- 11) You worry that people might be taking advantage of grace if it's preached "too much"—and then those people might do anything they want.
- 12) You feel guilty if you didn't attend every service and activity of your church.
- 13) You feel that your "superior commitment" to follow Christ allows you to be above others in your church.

Conclusion

We live under the blessing of the New Covenant (Luke 22; I Cor. 11). We enjoy the fact that as John states in 1:17, "The Law came through Moses but grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ." Hence we have the new mandate and the proper method through the Spirit of God to achieve with the right motives lives that honor and glorify God. Obviously I'm not saying that obedience to the New Covenant law that is written on our heart is inevitable or automatic. But I am saying that it is now normal and natural. Of course, there is a significant difference between something that is inevitable and something that is natural. Obedience to the New Covenant law of liberty is not easy. Romans 6 demonstrates the difficult battle, and Romans 7 describes the potential devastating defeat in the Christian life.¹⁸

¹⁸ It must be admitted that there are many theologians from the reformed perspective that understands that Paul is referring to himself in a pre conversion state in Rom.7 In other words his description is what he was like as a non-Christian. However, the context seems to make this unlikely. Consult any major commentary on the book of Romans for a list of the exegetical options and theological conclusions for the variety of views.

As Hodges has stated:

However, through the personal ministry and indwelling of the Holy Spirit the Christian life can be lived so that we can realize the truth of Jesus' words, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt 11:30). John puts it this way, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome" (I John 5:3). If we perceive the Christian life as an enormous burden, we have yet to understand the real nature of life under the New Covenant. Our personal freedom from the Old Covenant law is not yet a reality in our experience. Peter put it so succinctly at the Jerusalem Council, the Mosaic law was a "yoke...which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear" (Acts 15:10). Hence legalism has no place in justification or sanctification. This is not to say that there is no place for discipline in the Christian life.¹⁹

Legalism, letterism and legality are certain death to the spiritual life. Unfortunately it is a ubiquitous reality in the church among the saints. This introduction to the topic is meant to lead us to a deeper investigation of the Scriptures to seek spiritual answers that we might "keep in step with the Spirit" and become "He (or she) that is spiritual."

¹⁹ See Hodges, "Legalism".