

Labouring Together with God – Part 2

The Christian life is the only thing on earth that is a cooperative venture between God and man. All else man does, or at least thinks he does, on his own. For that reason, very few born again believers have an immediate sense of how to cooperate with the grace of God.

As we saw in Part 1 of this series, people generally lean toward one of two extremes. One extreme, which we looked at in detail – is laziness. Laziness thinks that God's grace will work in spite of my obedience. Therefore, it disobeys – doing less than, or even the opposite of, what God requires – while it presumes upon the grace of God to save the day.

But on the opposite end of the scale, the legalist takes matters into his own hands. He thinks his obedience will work in spite of God's grace. Therefore, he thinks and acts in a way which nullifies, rejects or ignores the grace of God and the glory of God.

In fact, most of us are mixtures of both. We have the ability to be very inconsistent and can be lazy in one area and quite legalistic in another. But having looked at the lazy Christian in detail in Part 1, let's now examine the legalistic Christian.

Mr Legalist

Legalism is one of those badly abused terms in modern Christianity which has come to mean something which it ought not to, while still having a useful meaning when used correctly. Often, you hear people saying – “That church is very legalistic” or “that pastor is very legalistic.” Upon closer investigation, you find out that what they mean is, ‘that church insists on defined standards of behaviour’ or ‘that pastor has a narrow interpretation of godly living.’

Now in fact, as we'll see, having strict standards, or being rigorous in your application of separated living, is not legalism. Rather, these can be very necessary and beneficial things, given our flesh. Because of misuse, the term has become a badly misapplied epithet – after all, if you want to smear a church or a pastor's reputation, just call them legalists, and people will flee, fearing something they're not exactly certain of.

So what is legalism? Strictly speaking, the legalists of the Bible were those who taught that works were necessary to complete salvation by faith. Therefore, the Galatians were buying into legalists who were saying circumcision is necessary to be saved. In today's context, we have a more popular usage which goes beyond the heresy of adding works to salvation. I think this is a helpful definition of a legalist:

A legalist is someone who believes that his acts of obedience are in themselves enough to produce righteousness and merit favour with God.

In other words, he neglects the grace of God as the initiator, the enabler and the finisher of his obedience. He does not ultimately see God's glory as the motive, and thinks that his own discipline and willpower is the dynamic – the power that effects change. In his opinion, spiritual growth is a matter of simply keeping a set of standards or rules – like a recipe, which, if all ingredients are present – the end result is guaranteed.

Lip service is paid to the grace of God, but ultimately, as A.W. Tozer once said, if the Holy Spirit didn't show up, nobody would notice, and nobody would be any different. The whole thing is operating on the

machinery of raw human discipline and willpower. So let's break that down and see the biblical portrait of a legalist.

1. The legalist believes he can change or grow himself spiritually

This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?

Galatians 3:2-3

Here, Paul rebukes the Galatians for thinking that their perfection – their maturity and completion – would be by another means than by the one they began with. He exposes the foolishness of their thinking – they had begun the Christian life by the Holy Spirit, by faith, and for some reason, they were thinking the completion thereof would be by another means.

The legalist says, 'Yes, we are saved by grace through faith, but after that, we need to finish what God started!' But this is tragically wrong. Hebrews 12 tells us that Jesus is not only the Author of our faith, but the finisher as well. Salvation is by grace through faith, but so is sanctification, or spiritual growth. In fact, Paul captures so much of this beautiful thought in a gem of a verse hidden in Colossians 2:6: *"As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him..."*

The Bible says: in the same way you received Him – walk in Him. Well, how did you receive Him? In humble faith, accepting His grace! So, walk the same way – let the manner of your Christian life be one of humbly yielding to Him for His grace in every part of life. Continue to look to Him in repentance, in dependence, in submission – receiving His love, believing His love and yielding to His love. In short – live the Christian life the same way you got it – by grace through faith.

But the legalist thinks that grace through faith is simply the jumpstart to get the engine of his own self-discipline and independent willpower going. He thinks he may have gotten a push at the start, but now it's up to self to keep things going.

2. He is critical of the weakness of others and impatient with their poor discipline

Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat. And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, "This man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner."

Luke 7:36-39

Here a Pharisee's legalistic heart was exposed – for him, there is no place for interaction with those who have failed. He was critical, indeed intolerant, of the sinful life of this woman. Because legalism is not in touch with the grace of God, it is not gracious.

This is precisely why Jesus went on to tell the Pharisee about two debtors who were forgiven differing amounts. Through this Jesus explain that one who is forgiven much, loves much. By that he meant: the one who senses the largeness of his debt to God and revels in the mercy of God feels great love and gratitude to God.

The legalist, who revels not in the grace of God but in his own sense of consistency and faithfulness, has little joy in forgiveness, and so little compassion on those who need it. You'll find him more often than not, scowling at the lost, shaking his head at the backslidden, inwardly disgusted with the spiritual lukewarmness of others.

But a balancing thought is necessary here. Does this mean we are to be tolerant of one another's sin? Should we pick up the now worn-out motto of the Popularity-Driven church: 'Don't be judgemental'?

No – the Bible tells us again and again not to tolerate sin in one another. When Jesus spoke about taking the log out your own eye, he then added the crucial phrase many are loathe to mention, *"...and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye"* (**Matthew 7:5**).

In other words – self-examination is to be done so that we are better able to clearly discern the sin in another's life, so as to deal with it. So, no, we are not to be tolerant of sin in one another. Correcting each other, admonishing each other, holding each other accountable – even exercising church discipline – this is not legalism, this is brotherly love.

Legalism is the attitude of being intolerant of each other, impatient with each other, willing to harden our hearts against each other, or write each other off as hopeless, useless and failures. In contrast to the hard heart of the legalist, Paul says in **1 Thessalonians 5:14**: *"Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all."*

3. The legalist prides himself on his 'achievements' and on his consistency

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men; extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Luke 18:9-14

The legalist measures his own performance against that of others, and against his own man-made standard. As such, he is seldom broken before God, crushed by the weight of God's glory and his hopelessly inadequate life. He knows nothing of Isaiah's reaction upon seeing the glory of God – *"Woe is me for I am ruined."*

No, his focus is on his own personal religious track record. As he looks at that, he is quite pleased and satisfied. His church attendance, his involvement in church, his Bible reading, his knowledge of the Bible, his prayer, his generally moral life seems to speak for itself, in his eyes.

But because his joy is in his own discipline and consistency, he does not find much joy in God. That's why Jesus said, the man prayed *with himself*. You're not talking to God when you boast about your apparent moral consistency. And the more experienced the legalist gets at living in his disciplined way, the prouder of it he is, overtly or secretly. He's certain that all his years of deeds done for the cause of God must add up to a pretty impressive retirement annuity in heaven.

4. He secretly compares his performance to that of others to find satisfaction

For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

2 Corinthians 10:12

You'll always spot a legalist by his longing to belong. His heart is squarely planted under the graven image of man-pleasing. He does what he does to gain the respect of those in his group, to continue to fit into the group, or even to be the leader of the group. He compares his life or his ministry or his church to that of others and does the Christian equivalent of keeping up with the Joneses.

Indeed, when Jesus began to rebuke the Pharisees on the Sermon on the Mount, he repeatedly used this phrase: *"that they may have glory from men; that they may be seen by men, that they may appear to men"* and then He would say – *"Truly I say to you, they have their reward."*

Legalism is creating man-made hoops and then jumping through them for the applause of others. It is not God-centred, and it is not Spirit-controlled. His Christian life is racked by insecurity. His security is only as strong as the approval he has recently gained from another in his group.

5. The legalist is a spiritual perfectionist and is racked with guilt when he fails

Because his joy rises and falls upon his own sense of accomplishment and consistency, when his flesh chooses another way, he is racked with self-loathing and guilt. He is not always grieved that he sinned against God, he is angrier at himself for failing to keep to his standards. He's disgusted with himself that he is not as strong as he thought himself to be. He has failed to maintain his own high image of himself in his own eyes, and his pride is wounded by his failure.

6. He invents man-made standards and insists that he and others meet them to be pleasing to God

A legalist, like the Pharisee, starts out with a noble motive – to obey God implicitly and guard the truth of His Word. But over time, his efforts go beyond Scripture. In seeking to keep one away from violating a commandment, he builds another commandment around it like a fence. Around that one, he will build another one.

The Pharisees had started with God's command to do no labour on the Sabbath, and had built a huge set of man-made regulations regarding what could and could not be done on the Sabbath. So much so that they were offended by God's own power working on the Sabbath. God the Father was the one working through Jesus, as He pointed out:

Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner."

John 5:19

So it was God Himself – the one who created the Sabbath and gave the command to hallow it – who healed on the Sabbath. But as far as the legalists were concerned – this violated their system. They had built so many man-made standards to safeguard the original command that they even prohibited doing good on the Sabbath! Jesus observed of them:

"For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers."

Matthew 23:4

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel"

Matthew 23:23-24

The legalist always ends up majoring on the minors and minoring on the majors. He becomes increasingly unbalanced and out of touch with God's priorities, because the focus has shifted from God's Word to keeping a standard established in the group.

7. He emphasises external acts and neglects heart attitudes

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also."

Matthew 23:25-26

The legalist is usually a very practical, result-oriented person. Therefore, what he wants is things that can be measured, observed, and ultimately controlled. That's why his test of spirituality will always centre on very external things – your dress, your appearance, your presence at church, how many you have witnessed to this year, even your Bible reading schedule.

Now, these are all things which the Bible does have something to say about. We are not saying they are non-issues. But the legalist will emphasise the measurable things at the expense of those things which cannot be measured – like illumination of Christ in Scripture, the fullness of His Spirit, the depth of submission and yieldedness to God, the sense of abiding in Christ, the overall love for God.

The legalist regards such things as being too heavenly-minded and of no earthly good. He doesn't like to talk about things which he cannot control. So he will spend most of his time preaching about things which can be quantified. He likes to think of himself as practical, but in fact, he is merely superficial. He does not cultivate depth in himself, and does not long for it in others either.

8. He neglects God's grace and sovereignty and runs ahead of God to establish his own righteousness

"For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God."

Romans 10:3

This is the heart of legalism – it won't submit. It lives under the pretence of being the most submissive, but in fact, it refuses to submit to God's righteousness. It establishes its own righteousness, and pretends it is God's because of its motives, or its similarities. But it is man-made, man-run and man-centred. Man is the motive; man is the means; and man gets the glory.

Legalism does not fall slain under the law of God and cry out for enablement. Legalism does not yield up its rights and even its reputation to God. It works very hard to be successful in the religion game, so as to prove itself to be the wonderful person it knows it always was.

The problem with legalism is not its intense discipline or even strict rules. Intense discipline and strict rules are often exactly what the flesh needs to be mortified. This is precisely where the debate goes awry. A pastor, a church or a Christian that insists upon rigorous discipline or even a high standard of separation in the process of discipleship is not necessarily legalistic.

The problem is legalism's fleshly self-reliance that does not see God's grace as the motive or as the means for obedience, and that believes the act of obeying in itself will be enough.

For example, the problem with a legalistic farmer is not his diligent sowing or precise and industrious farming. It is his pride that neglects the fact that God must give the increase – God must germinate the seed, God must send the right amount of rain and sun at the right time. He believes his diligence and discipline is more than enough to guarantee a successful outcome.

The legalist likes to think he is 'very diligent', 'zealous for the things of God' or 'very faithful'. But if we examine his heart, we will find that he is not submitting to God: he is performing for man and for himself. He wants to control the process of change, and thinks his diligence will guarantee it. He refuses to trust God's grace and obey God. But the end result of the legalist is not much better than that of the lazy man.

The legalist will experience spiritual deadness, not life. His Christian life is hard, cynical and devoid of the brightness and joy that abiding in Christ brings. Jesus said of the Pharisees:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness."

Matthew 23:27

His life is filled with pride, not with humility. As such, his Christian life will have no end of conflict. As Proverbs 13:10 says, *"By pride comes nothing but strife, but with the well-advised is wisdom."*

The legalist will often be found arguing, defending his legalism, demanding others conform, attacking those who do not. The glimpses of the Pharisees in the New Testament do not portray a people given to unity and glad service of God, but of unhappy people, jealous to guard their group, their power, their identity.

His life will be upside down as far as spiritual priorities go. Try to tell the legalist that his Christian life lacks the love of God, and he will be quick to tell you that you do not understand the real meaning of the love of God. Try to tell him he majors on the minors, and he will be quick to tell you that he does not think some parts of the Word of God are unimportant.

However, the fruit of his life will be evident – unhappiness. Unhappy children, unhappy marriages, unhappy churches. There is frustration that life does not seem to be working out, even though he puts in all this miserable, rigorous discipline. He is frustrated that others won't see things his way or do things his way. And his frustration only makes everyone else all the more miserable.

To top it all off, there is no real holiness. The very thing he trumpets and appears to champion is in fact lacking in his life. There is apparent holiness, but debauchery lies under the surface, as Jesus pointed out. There is no real devotion to God, because there is no submission to God as a Person – as a living, loving Person. He submits to principles and ideas – because he figures life works better that way. But his actual relationship with God is as cold as an Arctic wind.

It's obvious that this is not the secret to the Christian life either. It does not lie with the lazy Christian, who thinks God's grace is enough in spite of his disobedience. It does not lie with the legalist, who thinks that his actions are enough in spite of the grace of God. It lies with the biblical balance – the loving labourer. It's this balance that we want to examine in Part 3 as we complete our series on Labouring Together with God.