

LEGALISM vs GRACE: The Theological Error That's Hurting Churches Today | Powerful Bible Sermon

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[0:00] We're looking at the theological error, you could say, that infects a lot of churches, legalism.

And you see the notes there for those watching online and in your hands for those present. Legalism, what is it? And really it's tonight talking about grace as the answer to legalism, that freedom that we have by God's grace.

And what is legalism? You could call it rural religion. It hurts people, it makes some people proud and other people get crushed.

It pushes young people away, sometimes from churches. It can harm a gospel witness as well. And it steals our joy, legalism. It is only God's grace that can truly change our hearts from the inside out. As much as people might be well-meaning by applying rules, it's only the grace of God that can really make that difference. And we believe that God calls us, of course, to be holy, to live differently.

[1:09] That's what we want to be. We want to be that godly church, that holy church that lives differently from the world. And the Bible gives us clear commands for our good. But there's a big difference between God's kind of holiness and a man-made kind of legalism.

Now, as a church, and many churches like ours, we want to have that high standard, but we don't want it to be that the standards, helpful though they are, become a burden.

So you see that there in the notes, that standards, of course, in music, dress, entertainment, and separation, they're helpful. But if we're not careful, they can turn into a heavy burden that God never intended.

Now, I've always largely been in churches like this one, of various persuasions though, that tended to be maybe a little bit more leaning to having strong standards and holiness.

And that's a good thing, but the danger is when it becomes a burden. So we're going to try to unpack some of that tension there. Firstly then, what legalism is not.

[2:16] Legalism is not obedience to God and to the Word of God. So you see there in the table, many people get confused and they think that following God's rules is the problem.

But no, following God's rules is the right thing to do. And so you see in this table here, and on the left side you've got there, what legalism is not, what it looks like, obeying God's commands.

That's not legalism, to obey God's commands. It tells us there in the Scriptures, John 14, verse 15, the Lord Jesus says, If you love me, keep my commandments.

He wants us to obey his word and to live according to his will, not according to the world's destructive value system. We're actually free from that.

And obedience is a way to show that we love Jesus. It's not a burden for us. It's not burdensome. His commandments are not grievous. They're not burdensome for us. It's interesting, there's about 900 do-nots in the Bible.

[3:18] So we should listen to that. The Bible says do not. We should do not. It's important that we obey God's commands. That's not legalism, okay? Obeying God is the right thing to do.

And next one, legalism is not having personal standards. Having personal standards is a good thing. Choosing modesty, for example, 1 Timothy 2, verse 9.

Avoiding things that are going to tempt us. That's the wise thing to do. And we could think of standards as being like guardrails around a dangerous road.

They protect us from harm. You don't want to have a chauffeur that's taking you right to the very edge of the bend with no guardrail there just to prove how good a driver they are, how close they

can get to the edge before they fall off.

You want to keep away from the edge. And the guardrails help us. So standards help us. For example, standards of dress, of music, entertainment. Avoiding those things that are not wise for us as a Christian.

[4 : 19] Next one, living separate from sin. Of course, the Bible tells us that we ought to live separate from sin. These are not legalistic things. It's actually obeying God to live separate from sin.

2 Corinthians 6, 17 says to come out from among them, be separate. He calls us to avoid compromise. That's obedience. It's not legalism. Next one there, church leadership and correction. Necessary order and correction and loving restoration kind of discipline. That's a good thing. It's not legalistic of itself.

It's shepherding. It's a godly control. It's the wise thing to have. Of course, when it veers to the extreme, then it becomes legalistic. But as far as obvious leadership and godly order in a church setting, that's a good thing.

And it's not legalism of itself. And then preaching against sin. That's not a legalistic thing to preach against sin because the Bible says reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.

[5 : 22] It tells us we should preach hard and strong against sin and tell the truth about sin because that's the loving thing to do. It's not legalism to preach the truth of the word of God about sin.

So we see all those things there. They're not legalism. The bottom line, though, is obeying God's word is a good thing. The problem is when we add our own rules to God's word.

That's where the trouble starts. So you see there the picture of, you can imagine, a dangerous road. The guardrails are there to protect, to keep us safe. You can imagine, well, the road itself is the Bible.

The guardrails are really the standards that help us with the safe driving on the road, the Bible. So we see what legalism is not.

Next one, you see what legalism really is. And there's three big problems you could say about legalism. So when we say this word legalism, just to define that, it means like rule religion, religion of rules, basically.

[6 : 28] And so what legalism really is, is believing that keeping rules, whether God's rules or man's rules, is what makes God love you or accept you.

And that's not true. It becomes a self-righteousness when we're trying to adhere to rules as if that's going to make God love us or accept us.

It's not how we get saved. It's not salvation. It's self-righteousness. And it's a mistake people make. So these three big problems, the first one there, of legalism, it makes man's rules sound like God's rules.

And the Lord Jesus says that in Mark 7, verse 7. He says, teaching for doctrines the commandments of man. When preferences like music styles, clothing rules, technology, are preached as if they were Bible commands, that's legalism.

It's not to say we ought to be guided about such things. But to preach them as if they are Bible is legalism because it's not directly biblical commands.

[7 : 31] You've got to distinguish between them. So see that first point there? It makes man's rules sound like God's rules. Next one. Legalism teaches that the rules save you.

And this is the Galatian era. The book of Galatians is all about this idea of trying to being justified by the works of the law. So they had, the Galatians had this problem with keeping various laws about dates, about food, about circumcision, and making that somehow justify themselves.

But Paul corrected them here in Galatians 2, verse 16. He says, a man is not justified. In other words, not made righteous by the works of the law. It's not by what we do.

So you see the picture there of a man trying to run a hamster wheel. It's the kind of picture of trying to justify yourself by the works of the law. And the Lord Jesus really made everything possible for our salvation at the cross.

And when he died on the cross, he said, it is finished. And that was the end of the law. Adding anything to what Jesus did on the cross, like having a baptism, a special prayer, a long list of do's and don'ts, some kind of behaviour checklist.

[8 : 49] It kind of breaks the gospel. It's adding to the pure gospel, which is by faith in what Jesus has done at the cross. The real religion turns following Jesus into a scary treadmill where you can never run fast enough.

All this duty, obligation, performance. That's how some believers, some churches are a bit inclined that way, where they've got to keep running, proving themselves, measuring up, running fast enough, obeying enough, fulfilling all their duties and obligations and performance enough. And this is the second problem here that legalism teaches that rules save you. It's not true. And then the third one is that legalism judges your heart by your outward appearance. Now, I could hold up a cup here that would look really lovely on the outside. Might have lots of decorations and colours and look like a very beautiful cup. But look inside. Oh, it's full of dirt. It's a dirty cup. And the Lord Jesus talked about that as he talked to the Pharisees in Matthew 23, which is all about hypocrisy and these Pharisees that were trying to perform to honour God, to please God, or to save themselves by their works. [10:12] And he says that you're cleaning all the outside of the cup, what people can see, but inside. He says it's ugly. It's dirty. And he said that you're like sepulchres, like tombs, full of dead men's bones.

Can you think of anything worse than walking into a tomb with dead bones in it? And that's how the Lord Jesus compared the Pharisees, that they were focusing all on the outside, the externals, but they were ignoring what was happening in the heart. And neglecting truths like love and mercy and faith. This is the problem with legalism that focuses on the outward, the externals, and misses the real point of the heart. And legalism, it creates two kind of groups, really. The proud rule keepers and the ashamed rule breakers.

So the pride, I am better. Or the despair, I'll never measure up. These two conflicting things. [11:24] And it makes people think, if you don't do it my way, you're not as good a Christian. Pride in those who think they keep the rules. They don't really, but they think they keep the rules.

And then despair in those who know they can't keep the rules. So this is the dilemma there. Next page we see where legalism sneaks in.

Here's some signs about legalism. It's sneaky. So you see on the left side there, some of the things that the legalists would think. Saved by grace, but kept by my good works.

So they're adding to the gospel, which is grace. They say, saved by grace, but kept by my good works. And that steals your joy and your confidence.

Salvation is a gift. It's entirely a gift. I like how it says there that salvation is a free gift, not a grade.

[12:24] It's not about our grading ourselves or our actions to merit it or deserve it. It's a gift, not a grade. That you have to keep earning it.

And Galatians 5.4 talks about that. And then the next one. A legalist would be judging others by how they look by externals.

And we could become a hypocrite, hiding our own heart's sins, like gossip or pride. Maybe they're things that people don't always see about us, that's on the inside of us.

We're right on the outside, but our hearts are full of sin. And we can have that perfect outward look. It talks about some we have a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.

So we need to be careful about judging others about how they look. Or the externals. Because who knows that they might be really righteous and godly.

[13:23] And they know the Saviour. They're walking with Jesus. They may not look like it, but it's the inside that matters. And then the next one we see, thinking holiness is just a list of don'ts.

So legalists would think, it's all about what we don't do. Oh, I'm a Christian because I don't do this, and I don't do that, and I don't do the other. And the more spiritual Christian is the one with the longest list of things that he has given up.

I'm the super spiritual, I'm the super Christian, because I've got a longer list of what I've given up than what you've given up. It's not true, is it? When we start to think about that, it's pride.

True holiness is about love, not lists. It's not checklists. It's not about things we've given up, as much as we ought to give things up. But it's not about that.

It's about our love. It's our love for the Saviour. Because in 1 Corinthians 13, it says that God says our actions are nothing. Though I give my body to be burned, though I give all my goods to the poor, though I do this and I do that, I'm just like a noisy gonging symbol without love.

[14:34] Without love, I'm nothing. And the next one you see, for a legalist, separation becomes isolation. Rejecting other believers over small things, just minor things in the scheme of things, we reject other believers.

We end up alone and critical. And the Lord Jesus tells us that it's by a love that people will know that we are his. It makes me think, I'm aware of a church down the road, and he was making the claim that he's really got no other churches in Australia that he can fellowship with, because he's got such a narrow definition of what is acceptable to him.

And that's really this legalistic mindset that you just can't associate with other churches, because they've got it so right, which means others have got it so wrong.

Next section, we see the damage that legalism causes. What does it cause? Oh, there's bad fruit. There's a whole lot of bad fruit to do with legalism.

So there's rural religion. It produces bad fruit, not only in our lives, but in churches as well. So pride. I am better than them. Division.

[15:51] Our church is the only right one. Fear and guilt. I have to be perfect for God to love me. That hamster wheel again.

Hidden sins, bitterness and hypocrisy. They grow behind that perfect outside, so it's a very shallow thing. Looks good on the outside, but there's things going wrong on the inside.

Bitterness, lack of love, hypocrisy, all of the things that people can't see that are on the inside of us. The hidden sins. And legalism, it can drive young people away, especially if they grow up hearing it's all about rules, but never about meeting the Lord Jesus in his grace.

He says, come unto me. And you can find rest for your souls. It can drive people away. And it can turn church into a courtroom where it's all a place of judgment.

Like you're just getting constantly hammered with judgment and judgment and judgment instead of being a hospital for hurting people. Now that's not to say the Bible talks very strongly about sin.

[16:57] As I said before, it doesn't mean that we neglect hard preaching, preaching the truth about sin. But the emphasis is on the Savior from our sin and that the church can be like a hospital for the hurting to come and to be loved.

And we can lead them to the Savior and lift them up to know the Lord. Church should be a hospital. And legalism can be all about chains, not freedom.

And the gospel starts to sound like a heavy burden. It perverts the gospel to make it all about outperforming, which it's entirely not. It perverts the gospel.

Next section. What is the cure to legalism? It's living in grace-powered freedom. The cure for rule religion is not no rules.

Because then we've got the danger of lawlessness. Anything goes. There's no rules. That's not the answer. But the cure is grace. It's that things would be grace-centered, that the Holy Spirit would lead, and would have Christ-honoring liberty.

[18:10] That would get the emphasis right, the focus on Him. And as the truth is there in Romans 6.14, you are not under the law, but under grace. We're not under that law anymore.

We're under grace. Now, grace does not excuse sin, but it does break sin's power. So you see this contrast here between the two.

A rule follower, like a legalist, they obey to be accepted. I've got to keep obeying and doing all of this. To be accepted by God and others.

Or, actually, we're a grace follower. We obey because we are already accepted. We're accepted in the Beloved. We're accepted in Christ. And that acceptance, really, it motivates us to love Him and lovingly serve Him and lovingly obey Him.

Because we are accepted. Grace doesn't give us an excuse to sin. It gives us the power to say no to sin. It produces a holiness that comes from our love for Him.

[19:17] Not a fear of getting into trouble. So we're not living righteous because we're afraid of judgment, but because we love our Savior. We love Him. And, again, about standards.

They protect purity. They guard against temptation. It's good to have standards when they reflect biblical principles. That's a good and righteous thing. And then we have that holiness that flows from love.

Because we love our Lord. He saved us. He's ransomed us. He's redeemed us. We've deserved nothing of it. And because we love Him, we want to honour Him and obey Him. It flows on.

So you see this balance here. The perfect balance is, as our Lord Himself, He was full of grace and truth. It's the character of Christ. Grace and truth.

Both. In Christ. You see there, truth without grace is legalism. If there's no grace, it just becomes hammering people.

[20 : 17] But grace plus truth is what we need. And then grace without truth. So if it's all about grace but not having any Bible direction, it becomes a license to sin.

Oh, there's no rules. We do what we like. Like, that's not the way either. But we see they go hand in hand. Both. Grace and truth. It's Christ's likeness.

Like John 1.17 of our Lord. Full of grace and truth. So it's finding that balance. That's a good godly thing. And we see the Lord directs us to His way.

His righteousness plus nothing is full acceptance. So when you're saved, of course, it tells us that He was made sin for us who knew no sin. That we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. So He takes our sin and He gives us His righteousness. It's Christ's righteousness plus nothing is full acceptance. That we trust Jesus to be our Saviour and our sanctifier and our holiness, our righteousness.

[21 : 25] It's all Christ. And then we see when we have that acceptance, it leads us to want to honour Him and be a fruitful believer.

It flows on from that acceptance. But there's no requirement for works. We love people. We show grace.

We meet people where they are. That's the kind of church we want to be. That we want to love people and introduce them to the Saviour. We still call them to holiness and obedience to God's word.

But it's under grace. It's salvation is by grace. And we want to emphasise that. And the obedience comes because grace prompts it. And the Holy Spirit leads us.

And Christ-centred living happens. There's various discussions about extending grace in a couple of places there.

[22 : 23] Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-10. Talk about how we can extend grace to other people. When we have those situations where we might have different convictions, we can give space for different opinions on non-essentials.

So we don't divide over secondary issues. There's sole liberty like we talked about a couple of weeks or so ago. We've got liberty to have different opinions amongst ourselves.

We can extend grace. We can give space for that. And we can receive the weaker brother without fighting. There's differences we might have about practices. We can have the grace to the weaker brother.

We don't have to all agree on the same standard necessarily there on those secondary issues. And we should not despise or judge other believers.

We should seek for peace and unity, the building up of the church, and do everything for the glory of God and to bless others too. So real freedom, it means, yes, we hold strong biblically-based convictions whilst we also show Christ-like love.

[23 : 36] It's having the heart of Christ, isn't it, to extend grace. Next page we see how to hold strong standards without legalism.

So this is the kind of balancing act, really, because, again, as a church we want to be strong. We want to be forthright. We preach holiness. We preach righteousness. We preach that we should be zealous of good works.

We should be those living sacrifices. We should be that holy people, that set-apart people that God calls us to be. So we want to preach that, but we don't want to err on the side of legalism.

It's finding that balance and trying to put that forward in a way that isn't a conflict. So how, then, are we to hold strong standards without legalism?

You see that there? First one, teach the why before the what. So when we might introduce some discussion about some matter, we say, the Bible says this, that's the why, so here's how we try to live it out.

[24 : 43] And others may apply that differently. So we're being honest, we're building trust, so we're teaching the principles first and the applications second. So the Bible says, dress modestly.

We might say, well, we interpret that as some guidelines here that we could put to you how to apply that. Others may apply that differently. Next one you see, focusing on heart issues first.

We worry more about heart sins, because that's really what counts. We could focus a lot on the outward appearances and major on the minors, making a fuss about really somewhat trivial things and missing preaching on things like obvious sin, like pride is a sin, prayerlessness, bitterness, a lack of love, all of these things that can really hinder.

It's the heart, getting the heart right. That's what really matters. And we can miss that if we just major on the minors. We should major on the majors and make sure that we cover the heart issues first.

The next one you see, measure things by the fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5 talks about those nine fruit, love, joy, peace, etc. Do we focus on that in someone's life, rather than maybe looking at their haircut or their music or whatever it be that we could find fault with that perhaps?

[26 : 11] But we don't measure people by that. It's rather the fruit of the Spirit. That's what matters. That's the focus of the Word of God. And then the next one, when we are holding strong standards, be honest about traditions.

So you might say, this is our church's practice, but it's not a direct command from the Bible. So we might have a particular stand as a church about what we do in the music department, what we preach or what we talk about.

That's our practice. Some of it is not a direct command from the Bible, but that's our conviction, our stand that we've come to as a church. Next point, love people more than standards.

Let's love people. That should be the priority. That should be the important distinguishing point about our church, that we love people.

And I think I look back on where I've talked about some particular thing and someone's got offended with me, and it probably was more of a preference thing. I think, well, maybe I missed it. I missed it that time.

[27 : 18] Because love should be the motivator for what we do. And it should be that love that's a witness to the world, that we're His.

And then the last one, preach grace every day too. Have preached grace. When we forget grace, the real religion, the legalism, can creep back in. So that pride, feeling superior because of our standards, and it can get in the way of really godly truth.

Some simple everyday tips we could think about. How do we make this happen? How do we apply this? How do we have that kind of church that we don't have legalism?

We're not going to swing that way. We want to teach God's word. What are biblical principles about modesty, about separation, about stewardship, about glorifying God?

For example, the why. We dress modestly. Why? Because we belong to God and we want purity.

So that's the reason. That's the why. We ask why for every standard.

[28 : 25] And we trust the Holy Spirit to change hearts. A list of rules can't do His work. So why do we avoid worldly entertainment? Why? Because we want clean hearts before God.

We want to fill our minds with that which pleases God. So the why, we want to please God. It translates into the what. What we do.

Our standards. And we don't use standards to control people. We don't use rules to control people. Because some churches it's all about this kind of heavy control that some pastors exert.

And it becomes a spiritual abuse. It's not loving shepherding. So we would hopefully lay out some biblical principles.

Here's the whys and our recommended whats as to how to implement that. And it's up to the believers to hopefully come to their own convictions and have their own soul liberty on those decisions.

[29 : 28] So not this spiritual abuse that's dictating everything that the church does. It's important that we walk in grace. When you think the same grace that saved you is the grace that keeps you and the grace that helps you to grow.

It's all about grace. It's grace saving us, keeping us. And grace will hold us and deliver us to glory. It's grace from start to end, isn't it?

And let's be guarded. If our standards make us proud or harsh, we want to run to the cross. And really when we think about standards, apply them to ourselves first.

It's really important, isn't it? We can have standards and standards are good. But we can look at others and think they're not measuring up to my standard. Whereas really I'm probably not measuring up to it myself.

And we want to run to the cross and remember God's mercy and His grace. And then on the other side of the coin, if your freedom, your liberty makes you careless, you just don't care what you do and just do anything you feel like doing.

[30 : 34] If it's making you careless, then run to the cross. Remember the price that He's paid. You're His. You're His property. You're His possession. You belong to Him. You're not your own anymore.

You're bought with a price. And so that liberty shouldn't make us careless that we just don't care about what we do. And then, so you see the end there. Legalism says, do this and maybe God will accept you.

That kind of treadmill, that hamster wheel again. It's all about performing, about doing, about measuring up. Do this, do that and maybe God will accept you.

But Jesus says, you're already accepted because of me. Because I paid for you. At the cross, I paid the price for you. So now let's walk the road together in love and freedom.

See that we can rest in His love. We can let that love make us holy. Because our loving Saviour, we want to honour Him, don't we?

[31 : 33] To please Him. And surely He wants us to. So let's be that people of strong faith. And even stronger love. So there's two things here.

You've got conviction and compassion. That we'll, yeah, we'll have strong biblical standards. That we want to honour our Lord and live holy and righteous.

And not live worldly and carelessly. We'll have the truth as well as the grace. We'll be full of grace and truth. And so we'll have strong convictions.

We'll have strong faith. But even stronger love. Where we can love one another. And not everyone is at the same level. With all kinds of issues, you could think. And so let's have that heart to lean upon His grace.

The one who is full of grace and truth. And have that kind of Christianity that's motivated by love. Which produces real holiness, real freedom and real power.

[32 : 39] So again, think of grace. Christ saves us by His grace. It's all His unmerited, undeserved kindness and mercy. He grows us by grace.

He helps us. He's long-suffering towards us. He helps us to keep growing. He helps us when we slip and fall and mess up.

It's grace as He grows us. And it's grace that keeps us. And grace that will welcome us home. In His presence. For by grace are you saved through faith.

That not of yourselves. It is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast. So, think brothers and sisters. Hopefully, giving you some kind of food for thought.

I know for myself. I can look back and think. Maybe I was a bit too legalistic with some things in my past. And I might have veered that way. And then maybe sometimes I veered the other way.

[33 : 38] Where I didn't really care. About pleasing my God. And living to honour Him. We can flip either way, can't we? But know that His grace is there for you.

And that He's always gracious. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You that You do so love us. As You showed at the cross, Lord. Where You laid down Your life for sinful men.

For me. And in all my sin. As I was an enemy towards You. As I effectively hated You. And was against You.

Lord, that now You've rescued me. And Lord, for each one that knows that tonight. That we can be rescued. That You take us out of the miry clay.

All of that cloggy, stinking, mucky mess of mire and clay. Of our sin. And You've set our feet on the solid rock. And You've taken us and put us on solid ground.

[34 : 39] Lord, we thank You for that salvation that saves. As we trusted You to pay for our sin. To forgive us our sin. To give us a home in heaven.

To transfer Your righteousness to us. And help us, Lord, to learn how as a church body. As a gathering of Your people. As individually.

As families. Or think about, Lord, what pleases You. And it won't be a treadmill of having to perform or measure up what others say. But we want to be led by Your Word.

By Your Spirit. To do that which is pleasing in Your sight, Lord. And help us to have the wisdom to choose wisely. Give us grace, Lord. That we don't put our rules on other people.

Or look at others and look down on them. Save us from pride, Lord. From that kind of Pharisaical pride. Lord, that we won't be like the Pharisee in Matthew 18.

[35 : 39] Who looked down on others and bragged on about what he was doing. But, Lord, we'll just be like the man who said, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Lord, we thank You for that.

We can know Your grace today. And help us to walk in it. Protect us, Lord, as a church from legalism. That we'll be a church that honours You without becoming legalistic. In Jesus' name. Amen.