

Gospel Living: Avoid Legalism

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[0 : 0 0] That's all right. Galatians chapter 5. Galatians chapter 5, verses 1 through 12. And I apologize to you, I'm giving you half a sermon this morning. Some of you are going like, what?

Well, sometimes this happens. I'm going through, and I think I'm going to cover as much as I think I'm going to cover, and then I get into it, and I go like, you know, we're just going to cut that in half and just cover about half of that. So we'll look at all the verses, but I had two points this morning, and I cut it in half, and now I have three points. I don't know how that math works out.

I don't know at all. This is an unhinged morning. Good luck is all I have to say to you from here on out this morning. Galatians chapter 5, beginning in verse 1, Paul writes this. It was for freedom that Christ set us free. Therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold, I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is under obligation to keep the whole law. You've been severed from Christ, and you're seeking to be justified by law, you who are seeking to be justified by law, and you have fallen from grace. For we, through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything but faith working through love. You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion did not come from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in you, in the Lord, that you will adopt no other view, but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished. I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves. This is the word of the Lord and all God's people said,

Amen. The last verse that David sang, the earth shall soon dissolve like snow. The earth forbear, no, the sun forbear to shine. For God who called us here below will be forever mine. If you've been raised in the church and you've sang amazing grace all your life, the last verse that you're used to hearing is something completely different. But the truth of the matter is, is that John Newton actually wrote as his last verse, that one that David just sang. The one that we're used to when we've been there 10,000 years, that was a much later addition. Somebody else added that into the song.

My point is, is that you go around and you start messing with people's songs that they're used to, and they're liable to look at you and say, I'm sorry, but you did that incorrectly. We have a tendency to have this attitude about ourselves that we know how something ought to be done and it ought to be done in a certain way. It ought to be done by the rules or whatever.

[3 : 23] Basically, we're, we're going to get into talking about legalistic, but I, I was just thinking to me that usually somebody is legalistic to me when they want me to abide by their rules, right? That's usually what we say. That's usually our attitude. If somebody wants me to abide by their rules, they have a set of standards for me, then I have a tendency to call them legalistic because I don't want to do what they have to say. You can see it in all kinds of ways. It comes out when we go to anything that you got a herd of people at, and they have to walk through a line, and they have to mark off the T's and dot the I's and stand in line and wait forever.

It's like, you know, I'm the kind of person that I have a tendency to follow the rules. There's some people in my family have a tendency to think the rules don't apply to them. It's just one of those things. It's just so strange how we end up having so many things in our lives that, that like in this point, I'm not going to follow the rules, but at this point, I'm going to follow the rules. And if I forced you to follow the rules that you didn't want to follow, then I'm legalistic to you. And if you forced me to follow rules that I didn't want to follow, then you're legalistic to me. And we just got this whole thing all just decombobulated, I guess. So I want us to look at what Paul's saying here because he does deal with legalism here. And it's important for us to understand what it is and why we should avoid it and how we can avoid it. And that's what I want us to do this morning. From this passage, then, I want to ask three questions, those three questions that I've just asked. What is legalism? Why should we avoid it? And how can we avoid it in the church?

So let's start with the first question. What is legalism? And I want to give you a definition. Now, if you picked up, every Sunday, I make a little half sheet that basically has the outline of my sermon on it. There's some back there. There's some up here. So if you're not a note taker, that's fine.

I'm not a note taker when I listen to sermons. Some people are. It helps them to focus. That's fine. It's there. But I have the definition written on there if you want to see it. But my definition basically is something like this. Legalism is when we treat something that is not essential for our salvation or sanctification as though it is essential for our salvation or sanctification.

Right? So let me just be sure you understand all the words that I'm saying. And then we'll get into how I got this definition. Essential. That means it's required. You can't do without it.

[6 : 19] Right? If that's not there, then there's no salvation, no sanctification. Salvation. What do I mean by that? That's our being saved. We're walking in darkness. Now we're saved. We're with the Lord. We're going to heaven when we die. Sanctification. It's the process of being made holy. Right?

So if you get saved, you're born again. And if you use the metaphor of being born again, now you're going to grow up into Christ. Right? And all your life should be growing up into Christ.

That's sanctification. That's being made holy. Okay? Are you with me? Just all of a sudden, I feel like there's a barrier here between us. I'm telling you what, I am on fire today. Get ready.

Here we go. So here's the thing. There's times that people have a tendency to count something or treat something as essential for salvation when it should not be treated as essential for salvation.

Now let me talk to you about where I get this definition from, and then I'm going to illustrate this for you. Okay? Well, number one, I get this from the book of Galatians as a whole. As Paul contrasts, faith and works, law and promise. And he shows that these Judaizers who keep wanting to circumcise everybody, saying, now listen, this is not going to save you. This is not going to be a part of it. You can't have this as a part of it. So that's where I get it first. Second place I get it is Galatians chapter 5 verse 1, where he again comes with another contrast. This time, it's freedom.

[7 : 49] It's for freedom that Christ set us free and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. So if you follow circumcision, then you're obligated to the whole law. You're doing this by works. You have a yoke of slavery. Right? All of those go together. All of those together make up legalism. Okay? It's this thing you've got to do. The third thing is from Galatians chapter 5 verse 6. This is a very interesting passage to me because Paul says, for in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything. Now, first of all, circumcision means nothing. That's what he's saying. It means nothing. Or another translation reads, circumcision counts for nothing. The point is, is that circumcision cannot be something that is leaned upon, rest upon, counted upon, or considered essential for your salvation. And if that's true, then neither can uncircumcision. You follow me? So you got these

Judaizers. You got these Judaizers on one side that they're saying, circumcision. You need to be circumcised if you want to be saved and go to heaven. But then you have the potential because of the human involved of someone going like, I'm uncircumcised, therefore I'm saved. In other words, you could count the uncircumcision just as essential for salvation as that guy over there. Right? The problem is, is you can't be either one. We tend to count things as essential for salvation that are not essential for salvation. Let's talk about driver's license for a second. A legal driver in Texas.

What is essential for someone to be a legal driver in Texas? There's three things. Number one, you got to be the right age. Number two, and there's all kinds of laws that govern that. So if somebody said to me, well, you could be 14. Yeah. And there's laws that govern that. So you got to be the right age. Number two, you got to pass a driver's test. Number three, you got to fill out paperwork, pay fees. There's all kinds of paperwork, all kinds of fees, but that's it. Now, some of you might be sitting there thinking to yourself, oh, no, no, Brady, you got to have a car to be a legal driver in Texas. No, you don't. You don't have to have a car to be a legal driver in Texas. That's ridiculous. Well, you got to have car insurance. No, you don't. You can be a legal. Now, listen, I know this because I had five kids and I've taken them to the driver's license place and I've gotten five driver's licenses besides my own, right? So you do not have to have car insurance. You do not have to have a car in order to get a legal driver's license. That's a little bit like how we like to count other things as essential for salvation. It'd be like me coming up and saying, oh, no, no, no, you must have car insurance. If you don't have car insurance, you can't be a legal driver. Then you could look at me and you could say, you legalist, because that's exactly what it would be. If I said to you, no, no, no, you can't get your driver's license unless you own a car, you'd have to look at me and you'd have to say you're being a legalist. This is the point. The point is, is that we as human beings can turn anything into a legalistic thing as we make it essential for our salvation or sanctification. So this is where I need to press you. This is where I need to talk to you and say, you're professing Christians. I'm assuming that the vast majority of you in here, you, if I said to you, are you a Christian? You would say yes to me. And my question to you is this, have you counted something essential for salvation that God has not counted as essential? Because you do understand there are some essentials to salvation, namely the blood of Christ and faith and repentance. But outside of that, nothing else is essential to our salvation.

So do you count something as essential to your salvation that God does not count? Did you know that God does not count reading your Bible as essential for your salvation?

Do you recognize that God did not say that it's essential for your salvation to raise good moral kids? Do you realize that God does not count as essential for your salvation? That you're a nice person or that you vote a certain way or that you pray every day? Those are not essential for you becoming a Christian.

[12 : 54] The only thing essential is the blood of Christ and faith and repentance. Think about salvation. Think about salvation. When we talk about sanctification, we've got a whole different ballgame going on.

Right? You can't obey to be saved, but once you're saved, you're supposed to obey. Right? Are you with me? See, here's the thing. Sanctification means to be made holy. You cannot be made holy unless you obey God.

Now, there's a whole bunch of stuff we could get into, and I could try to prove this point to you, but I'm just assuming it this morning. So if you don't understand what I'm about to say, then you might have to come to me later. But here's the thing. You cannot grow in your walk with Christ if you're not obedient to Christ.

You cannot mature from birth to a mature man in Christ if you're not obedient to Christ. You cannot grow as a Christian and become more holy if you're not obedient to Christ.

If you're never obedient to Christ or you think that He doesn't have anything for you to obey, you will never grow and mature in your faith, in your holiness, in your righteousness in Christ.

[14 : 15] But you can never obey in order to be saved. So, this is where the Ten Commandments become applicable to us as Christians.

They're applicable to us not so that we can be saved, but because we are saved and we should grow in holiness. And one of those commandments says this, that we should not bear false witness against our neighbor.

And if I tell you that binding your conscience by the Word of God, you should never tell a lie, or we make the modifications of that as we need to.

If you want to know about that, ask me later. My point is this, if we say you're not supposed to lie and then you go off living your life in lies and deceit, you're never going to grow in your Christian life because it is essential to obey.

But if I were to come to you and say, okay, if you want to grow in holiness, you need to go sacrifice a lamb every day out the backside of your house. Then you're going to say you're crazy because that's not essential.

[15 : 24] That's not essential for your sanctification. Legalism is when we turn something good into something essential for our salvation or sanctification.

And I hope that you understand me amidst all of my foibles here. So let's talk about the second question, and that is, why should we avoid legalism?

And I want you to look closely at verse 2, 3, and 4 in chapter 5. Verses 2, 3, and 4. Verse 2, Paul says this, Behold, I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.

I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he's under obligation to keep the whole law. You have been severed from Christ.

You who are seeking to be justified by law, you have fallen from grace. Now, I think what Paul does here is he kind of plays a little game with the way he puts his words in the sense that he's putting a couple of things in there that he's holding together.

[16 : 36] For instance, when he says in verse 2, Christ is of no benefit to you, I think that's a very similar thing to him saying you have been severed from Christ. Right? And then I think in verse 3, where he says you must keep the whole law, I think that's very similar to what he says in verse 4, where he says you have fallen from grace.

And so what I want to do is I want to treat those four phrases under two headings. This is why. Why should you then avoid legalism? And the first is because Christ will be of no benefit to you if you don't.

Think about this. Christ will be of no benefit to you. You get nothing from Christ. You get no benefit. You get no blessing. You get no promises. You get nothing from Christ.

You've been severed from Christ. That is, you have been cut off from Christ. Removed from Christ. Christ. We're talking the perfect righteous Lord Jesus Christ due to his perfect obedience to his Father, the spotless Lamb of God whose sacrifice was for our sin.

His death upon the cross was for us. His resurrection, the power of the risen Lamb, the ascension, the enthronement of the King of Kings, the impending return of the Lord of Lords. If you take circumcision, if you live in a legalistic way, then none of that is of any use to you at all, ever, and you're cut off from it completely.

[18 : 09] Legalism is nothing to toy with. If you're going to live as a legalist counting something essential for salvation that God did not count, then there is no going to Christ and asking him for forgiveness of your sin.

There's no being adopted into the family and assured that you're loved and adored, and there's no glorification that awaits you. All of our righteousness is as filthy rags, and if you want to live a legalistic life, then you will get what your righteousness earns.

It's nothing but filthy rags. Christ is of no use to you. You've been cut off.

The way I would illustrate this is if you ever sit down and listen to a Mormon or Jehovah's Witness talk through what they believe, they so downplay what it is that Christ has done, and they accentuate what it is you must do.

That's being cut off from Christ. The second reason comes in those two phrases, you must keep the whole law, and you have fallen from grace. You can see in verse 3 and verse 4, if you make something essential that has not been essential for salvation by God, then you must keep the whole law, all of it.

[19 : 48] You have fallen from grace. Now, we need to talk about this phrase, fallen from grace, because a lot of people like to use this to mean something that it doesn't. In this place, it does not mean that you can lose your salvation.

That is not what this is talking about. First of all, it's not written to just single individuals as considered as individuals. It's written to the churches as wholes. It's a corporate idea.

Secondly, fallen from grace is not about the individual's personal experience. Instead, it's about a method of salvation, or it's about one of the ways that God deals with mankind.

If you go back in the Old Testament, you see that God dealt with his people through covenant, but a particular covenant of law. And so there are those who are then of law, and then those who are of grace, a way of God dealing with us.

It's very simple. You just look at the verse. It says, those of you who seek to be justified by law, that's exactly what the Judaizers are doing. They want people, if they're going to be Christians, to go back under law and do the things that they once did, but they cannot do, and that gives no life.

[21 : 03] They're trying to justify by law. But the other group that Paul's a part of, that Paul's preaching about, he's seeking to be justified by grace. By grace.

So in other words, if you're going to live a legalistic lifestyle, if you're going to count as essential for salvation, something that God didn't count as essential, then you have abandoned the way of faith that we know of.

You've abandoned the new covenant. You've abandoned preaching Christ alone, faith alone. And instead, you've reverted back to preaching some sort of law. That's what these Judaizers were after.

They wanted people to follow the way of Adam, and not the way of God. And if you're not a believer today, and it's very possible that there's somebody here who's not, you have to understand that I think that most non-believers, most unbelievers actually believe in a legalistic sort of way of living.

They do their best to try to be at peace with themselves, or if they believe there's a God, they do their best to try to be at peace with whatever God is there. And part of salvation is, in faith, we trust in Christ instead of our works.

[22 : 17] We repent of doing things our own way, both our sin as well as trying to pay for our sin, and instead we turn towards God. And if you're not a Christian today, you need to understand that there is not a single part of your good deeds that will ever be accepted before the Lord.

There is filthy rags before Him. Your only hope is to turn from yourself and turn to Christ instead. Christians, if this is true, why we should avoid all of this legalism, then we have a duty as we share the gospel with our friends to help them not go down a path of legalism as we share the gospel with them.

It is our duty then to show them their sin as we spread the gospel to them. You know one of the things you won't find in the New Testament in any of the ways that any of the apostles shared the gospel and preached the gospel?

You'll never hear them say, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. What you'll see them say is that Christ died for sins.

And then they will go to the law and they will press the conscience. This is the way we ought to share the gospel. We have to help people understand that they are in need of salvation.

[23 : 44] And the only way to help them understand that they are in need of salvation is to press the conscience through the use of the law. You ask a person, do you consider yourself a good person?

I say, well, yeah, I think I'm a pretty good person. Well, let's test that by the Ten Commandments. Have you ever told a lie? Ten Commandments say we're not supposed to lie.

Well, yeah, I've told a lie. Well, then what does that make you? Makes you a liar. Well, have you ever stolen anything? Well, no, I don't think I've ever stolen.

Even something small, even a small piece of candy? Well, yeah, I've stolen. I've stolen something. Well, what does that make you? I guess that makes me a thief. Hmm. You know, it also says you should not murder.

Should not murder. Jesus says that if you're angry with your brother, that means that you have committed this murder. So if you ever, have you ever been angry with another person in your life and murdered them by that anger?

[24 : 44] Well, yeah, that's probably true. So by your own admission, you're a lying, thieving murderer. On the day of judgment, when you stand before God and he judges you by his Ten Commandments, will you be guilty or innocent?

I don't know what that person's going to say, but do you understand what we're doing here? We're pressing the conscience so that a person understands they need Jesus. Because if they don't understand that they need Jesus, then why would they trust and why would they repent?

We need to avoid the legalism and as we do for our own sanctification. So that's talking about outreach. I want to talk about discipleship for just a second.

I want to talk about how it is that we as Christians grow in our faith. And we already talked about how we're to obey him, but there's a lot of people out there who want to press upon us things as essential for us to be able to grow and be good Christians that God has never commanded us to do.

Did you know, while it might be a good and wise thing to maybe wear a t-shirt that's got a verse of Scripture on it, that just because you wear a t-shirt with a verse of Scripture on it doesn't mean that you're being obedient to the Lord in anything at all.

[26 : 10] It may be wise, it may be good, you may love it, and that's a great thing and I wouldn't take away from it. But what you can't do is count something like that as being the sum total of how God's going to make you holy.

We have a tendency to focus on external things like that so much that we miss the internal struggles that we have. You just go back to anger, go back to committing adultery, go back to these things, and there's such an internal problem that we have there.

That's why Jesus says, if you're angry with your brother from your heart, you've broken this commandment. Or if you look upon a woman with lust, you've committed adultery with her. Because it all starts in the heart. And if we're going to grow in our Christian faith, not only must we then obey what he has said, but we need to do so from the heart.

Let me give you just one example. Go back to the Ten Commandments. And one of the biggest problems that most Christians have in growing in their faith is their neglect of the fourth commandment. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

One of the reasons so many Christians are not growing in their faith is because they think that this is an optional thing to do. I'm not calling it essential on my own.

[27 : 27] This was written by the finger of God. This is something Christ himself lived out and showed us the example of how to live this out.

It's not legalism for me then to say to you that on the Lord's day it's essential for your growth and sanctification to be under the preaching of the word. It would be legalism for me to say that you need to be under my preaching.

Do you understand what I'm saying? To avoid legalism, what we don't want to do is have freedom right here in the middle and we're saying, listen, this is the ditch of legalism over here and we don't want to count anything as essential that's not counted as essential by God so therefore, boom, throw it all away and come over here.

No, because this is called liberalism. And we're going to get into that in verse 13 of chapter 5. What you can't do is look at the law and say, well listen, since we can't earn our salvation by law, we just need to take the law and throw it away.

Paul would say, may it never be. We can't get rid of the law because it's for sanctification, not our salvation.

[28 : 35] Do you understand what I'm saying? I pray the Lord would help us grasp these things. If we're going to grow as disciples of Christ and holiness, then we have to count as essential the things that the Lord counts as essential.

And the last question is how do we avoid the legalism in the church? Paul gives us three things beginning in verse 7. Look at verse 7. He says, you were running well who hindered you from obeying the truth.

This persuasion did not come from him who calls you. We need to understand the source of legalism. Paul isn't really wanting to know names here, but he's wanting them to be wary and understand where the legalism is coming from in their midst.

that it's not coming from God, but it's coming from other people who are teaching wrong things. Legalism can come from all sorts of places and we have to be careful. We have to be careful with what we're listening to.

We have to be careful with what it is we're taking in and the teaching that we're taking in. And the only surefire way for us to understand and know that something is legalistic and wrong is for us to study and know the gospel forwards and backwards and backwards and forwards.

[29 : 49] There is no other solution. There's not a short change. There's not a little litmus test that you can stick into a teaching and get a new color and see that it's a bad thing. No, you've got to hear it. You've got to listen to it and you've got to study the scriptures to know is this good or bad or not.

It means you have to read the word. You've got to memorize the word. You've got to listen to the preaching of the word. You listen to the word. You get the word in your life. Secondly, he says in verse 9 that we need to know how legalism gets a foothold.

He says, a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. He's used this illustration before. I think it's quite easy to understand what he's saying. His illustration is meant to show us how legalism gets a foothold and that is that it's small in the beginning.

It's not very big but once it becomes included it begins to mess up the whole church. In 1825 to 1835 Charles Finney one of the notable figures of the second great awakening every time he would preach every time he would have a revival service or something like that he would have what he called the anxious bench.

The anxious bench was right here up front. If you were anxious about your soul you were concerned with what was being preached he wanted you to come down here to the anxious bench and pray and receive people praying for you.

[31 : 15] Well over time that anxious bench began to be used in all kinds of churches but Baptist churches particularly as what we now call an altar call. It's funny to me because this is the first time in church history that it was ever done under Charles Finney.

And there are some places and I've told you about a friend of mine there are some places that believe that if a person doesn't walk that aisle during an altar call there's no way that they're really saved. Now I know that most of you don't believe that because when I told you the story the first time you kind of all went what?

Very incredulous. But the point is this that's such a small thing it's not bad if you want to pray and you think to yourself in the middle of the sermon or at the end of the sermon you want to pray there's nothing wrong with that.

There's nothing wrong with Charles Finney saying hey listen if you want to pray pray that's a good thing. If you feel convicted in the middle of a sermon then bowing your head to pray is a good and right thing to do.

But there's nothing essential about walking an aisle in order to get saved. Beloved we've got so many things that we tend to take a good thing and we morph it into something bad because we count it as essential.

[32 : 35] Third thing the way we need to deal with legalism in the church is verse 12. Paul says in verse 11 that he wishes judgment upon them or they are already judged but verse 12 then talks about what does the church need to do.

He says in verse 12 I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves. Paul's being so gentle and kind here isn't he? Huh.

It's the same concept that's in verse 4 of being severed from Christ. It's this idea of being cut off. And doing my best to be as gentle and tender with this subject as I can you do understand that circumcision is a cutting off.

It is a thing that would take place in the Jewish religion under the old covenant as a sign of the covenant from Genesis chapter 17 and the concept of cut off began to be a part of the life of the church or the life of the Jewish people even so far as an example like lepers.

A leper was somebody who had some sort of visible skin condition and they became an object lesson of sins virility and danger so that they would ostracize lepers outside of the camp so that nobody else would be infected but only as a sign and an object lesson of sin and sins danger as I sin and it infects you.

[34 : 11] But the lepers were said to be cut off from the camp. They were removed from God's people. This is what Paul is saying that these Judaizers who are within the church who are preaching legalism should be removed.

And I want to say to you without any hesitation that if someone were to stand here in this pulpit including myself and they were to preach legalism you as a church body have both the duty and the right to remove them from this pulpit.

You need to understand that the protection of this pulpit and the teaching that comes from this pulpit is your responsibility. Its first and primary responsibility lays with the congregation with the members of the church.

It's your responsibility to make sure that what you are taught is right in line with the word of God. Now it is also my duty to make sure that what is taught is right in line with the word of God.

It's your very primary responsibility for that. This is why you have to hold me in check. If I say something that just is so out there maybe I've misspoke because I do that a lot or maybe I'm saying something wrong.

[35 : 39] Either way you need to come you need to open the scriptures and we need to look. But the only way you can do that is if we understand and know what it is we believe.

So that's why this morning I have down here on this pew little copies of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000. I think it's a very accurate statement of what scripture teaches.

It doesn't say everything but it says some essential things. It's a good place to start. It's a good place for us to get on to the same page. If you want a copy they're free for you.

But as a church then this means that as we partner with other churches and with other ministries we cannot partner with churches or ministries that are preaching legalism. We need to know what they're preaching in order to partner with them for sharing of the gospel.

And if we don't do that then we're not doing our duty. And so then it comes down to this final thought and that is what about me as an individual? How can I avoid legalism on my own?

[36 : 43] and I'm going to tell you two things. Number one, come back next week and I'm going to finish the story. Because the only way really for us as individuals to avoid legalism is to look at what Paul says about freedom and liberalism.

It's really the only way for us to understand. Because this is not a continuum. Legalism to liberalism is a continuum but true freedom is off of that continuum. So I'm just going to give a plug.

Come back next week, listen to the rest of it, encourage you to do so. But let me give you a couple of things just as we close here today. You need to test everything by the word of God.

You need to test everything by the word of God. You need to ask yourself is this something God has clearly commanded? What's the purpose for which he's commanded it?

And am I treating it in the same way that God does? Is this something he's clearly commanded? What is the purpose for which he's commanded it?

[37 : 54] Am I treating it the same way that he does? In other words, does he consider it essential and do I? Does he consider it not essential to salvation or sanctification and am I violating them?

And then come back next week. Let's pray together. Thank you.