

Legalism in the Church

The essence of legalism is pride and hypocrisy. Legalism is an emphasis on outward forms and rituals, or strict adhering to dress standards and rules in religious circles. All cults and pseudo-Christian religions are full of legalism, because their whole system is based on earning their way to God by "good works" and following the rules of the "church" or organization, but this study will focus mainly on legalism within true Christian churches. It is possible for some Christians to get involved in legalism merely out of ignorance, because they are new Christians and don't know the Bible that well yet. However, for a person or group of Christians to remain in legalism, and have it be a part of their qualifications for church membership, or of judging and condemning other Christians, it is wrong, and comes from a prideful and hypocritical attitude of the heart. Jesus said that the attitude of the heart is more important than mere outward actions and following traditions, and that so-called "correct" outward behavior can sometimes mask an evil heart, such as with the Pharisees.

- Matthew 15:1-20** "Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, 'Why do your disciples transgress **the TRADITION of the elders**? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.' But He answered and said to them, 'Why do you also transgress the commandment of God **because of your TRADITION?**.....you have made the commandment of God of no effect **by your TRADITION. Hypocrites!** Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying, 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but **their HEART is far from Me.** And in vain they worship Me, **teaching as doctrines the COMMANDMENTS of MEN.**' Then He called the multitude and said to them, 'Hear and understand: not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but **what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.**' Then His disciples came and said to Him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?' But He answered and said, 'Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone. **They are blind leaders of the blind.** And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch.' Then Peter answered and said to Him, 'Explain this parable to us.' So Jesus said, 'Are you also without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth **come from the HEART,** and they defile a man. **For out of the HEART proceed EVIL thoughts,** murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.'"

Just as with the Pharisees, some types of legalism in churches today come from following tradition and man-made commandments and rules, most of which are **made up by TWISTING or misreading a Scripture passage** (II Peter 3:14-16). Some legalism comes from Christians, who should be under the New Covenant only, erroneously trying to put themselves back under the Law of Moses, the Old Covenant. Some legalism is a mixture of both, and comes from carnality (a person being controlled by the flesh rather than the Spirit of God), in that one person or a group of people likes to have others under their control. They like to have lordship over others, because it makes them think they are better than others, and having a list of rules and regulations for behavior gives them a basis by which to command obedience and exercise their control. Today, we would call them "control freaks". Obsessive controlling of others is a manifestation of **the sin of PRIDE,** and evidence that a person is under the control of their **FLESH, and not the Holy Spirit.** It is also the **"bitter envy and SELF-seeking in your hearts"** that the word of God calls "earthly, sensual (of the "flesh"), and demonic" (James 3:14-17). **Legalism APPEALS to people with low self-esteem:** both those with low self-esteem who feel better about themselves when they can rule and lord over others, and those who are too weak in the faith, unstable, and with too low of an opinion of themselves to study the Bible themselves and understand it correctly (read Romans 14:1-23).

- **James 3:14-17** "But if you have **bitter envy and SELF-SEEKING** in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above (it's not from God), but is **earthly, sensual (of the "flesh"), demonic**. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield (humble, submissive), **full of mercy and good fruits**, without partiality and without hypocrisy."
- **II Peter 3:16** "As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which **those who are UNTAUGHT and UNSTABLE TWIST to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.**"

An example of tradition-type legalism is where some groups say women should not wear any make-up or jewelry, and they base their teachings on I Peter 3:3-4 and I Timothy 2:8-9. In I Peter 3:3-4, we have **a contrast** between the woman who dresses up and adorns herself on the outside only, and the woman who is sweet and godly on the inside. This "gentle and quiet spirit" is actually the character qualities of Jesus Christ, also known as the Fruit of the Spirit, and these are the things that are important to God. The hypocrisy in Christian churches comes where you see denominations who don't allow the women to wear make-up or jewelry, but they wear elaborate hair-dos. Or, you have women who will not wear any jewelry, not even a wedding ring, because it's gold, and yet they will gossip and be full of envy, malice and bitterness. In other words, the wearing or not wearing of jewelry and make-up does not make a woman holy and Christ-like. I Peter 3:4 says, "Let it be the hidden person of the heart", but **legalism focuses on the outward appearance**, what can be seen. The Pharisees wanted to be "seen by men" when they prayed, fasted or gave to the poor, but Jesus blasted them for being hypocrites, cruel, selfish, and full of pride. Legalism is more concerned with the "letter of the law" than with the principle God is trying to teach us through a certain passage of Scripture. The **scriptural principle** being taught in I Peter 3:3-4, for instance, is that women should focus on their inner character, as opposed to outer "window dressing". It is not meant to be a command to never wear jewelry, or else women could never wear clothes either, because it says "of putting on apparel". The word "fine" is in Italics in your Bible, so that means it was added to help the reader understand the passage, and the original just says putting on apparel. The main principle God wants to get across in I Timothy 2:8-9 is that women should dress modestly, and that all adornment (jewelry, hair styles, clothes) should be in moderation. It is wrong for a Christian, man or woman, to spend too much time and money on fancy clothes, jewelry, and so forth - that is being self-centered and self-absorbed. In our society today, you could also include such things as plastic surgery. God is not concerned with how many wrinkles or how much cellulite you have. The world will try to get you to spend your money on face lifts, "boob jobs" and the like, but they are ultimately of no importance to God, and your money could have been spent more wisely in other ways, such as helping others, or in getting out the gospel.

- **I Peter 3:3-4** "Do not let your beauty be that outward adorning of arranging the hair, of wearing gold, or of putting on fine apparel; but **let it be the hidden person of the HEART**, with the incorruptible ornament of **a gentle and quiet spirit**, which is very precious in the sight of God."
- **I Timothy 2:8-10** "Therefore I desire that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath or doubting; in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves **in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation**, not with braided hair or gold or pearls, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works."

One kind of legalism that tries to put Christians back under the Law of Moses, is that of Sabbath-keeping. The Sabbath was **a special "sign" between God and ISRAEL**, and we as **Christians are NOT Israel, we are the "Body of Christ"** (Col. 1:24, I Cor. 10:32, Ephesians 1:22-23). Keeping the Sabbath is part of keeping the Law, and the Bible tells us over and over again that we are **saved by GRACE through FAITH**, as a FREE GIFT from God, not by the works of the law. In fact, God's word says, "by the WORKS of the law

(keeping the Old Testament commandments) NO flesh (no human being) shall be justified (made righteous)."

- **Read Galatians 2:4-16** (Verse 16) "Knowing that a man is **not** JUSTIFIED by the **works of the LAW** but by FAITH in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified **by FAITH in CHRIST** and **not** by the **works of the LAW**; for by the WORKS of the law NO flesh shall be justified (made righteous)."
- **Ephesians 2:8-9** "For by GRACE you have been saved through FAITH, and that not of yourselves, it is **the GIFT of God; NOT of WORKS**, lest anyone should boast."
- **Exodus 31:15-17** "For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a Sabbath of complete rest, holy (set apart) to the Lord; whoever does any work on the Sabbath shall surely be put to death." (Verse 17) "**It is a sign between Me and the SONS of ISRAEL** forever; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed."
- **Romans 6:15** "What then? Shall we sin because we are **NOT under LAW but under GRACE?** Certainly not!"
- **I Corinthians 10:32** "Give no offense, either **to the Jews (Israel)** or to the Greeks (Gentiles) of to **the CHURCH of God.**"

What does it mean to be "Not under LAW but under GRACE"? It means that we are saved by **GRACE through our FAITH** (see Ephesians 2:8-9), and NOT by our works or by keeping the Old Testament Law (including Sabbath-keeping), but that does NOT give us LICENSE to SIN or to live any old way that we please. We **SHOULD** do good works and be **OBEDIENT** to what we know God wants us to do, but as Christians, we are NOT to put ourselves back under the Old Testament Law or **any other form of LEGALISM, rituals or keeping ORDINANCES**. No SYSTEM of laws or rules can make a person HOLY. Being "UNDER GRACE" means we are to serve God out of the **motivation of LOVE and GRATITUDE**, and **by the POWER of the HOLY SPIRIT!** the early church was NEVER required to KEEP the SABBATH or ANY of the Jewish laws for salvation. Only a few suggestions were given by the elders in Jerusalem to the Gentile churches, and that was to keep them from offending those who came from a Jewish background.

- **Acts 15:1-29** (Verse 1) "And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, **you CANNOT be SAVED.**'" (Verses 5-11) "But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them, and **to COMMAND them to KEEP the LAW of MOSES.**' So the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: 'Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, **PURIFYING their HEARTS by FAITH.** Now therefore, **why do you TEST GOD** (see Matthew 4:7) by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through **the GRACE** of the Lord Jesus Christ **we shall be SAVED** in the same manner as they.'" (Verses 24-29) "Since we have heard that some who went out from us have TROUBLED you with words, UNSETTLING your souls, saying, 'You must be circumcised and keep the law'- to whom **we gave NO such COMMANDMENT.....**" "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from [eating or drinking] blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will DO WELL." (Notice, it says "do well", not "be saved")

An example of the "control freak" type of legalism was brought up in a question the other day, as someone referred to a friend who "would not allow his wife to wear make-up" and so forth. This kind of legalism, when the husband forces his wife to be in a menial or inferior position,

makes all the decisions for her, or treats her in any kind of abusive manner, is a **misunderstanding or twisting of Genesis 3:16**, "To the woman He said, your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." If you read Genesis 3:16 in context, **God is stating all the results of the curse upon the earth, NOT what is His plan for marriage**. This kind of controlling behavior is also a sign of low self-esteem in the man, and again, a manifestation of being "in the flesh" (carnal) and not filled with the Spirit. The evidences of **being filled with the Holy Spirit** are mentioned right in the verses following **the commandment to be filled**, but we don't usually read it that way. Ephesians 5:17-21 is all one long sentence, telling us what being filled with the Holy Spirit should result in: singing and praising God in our hearts, being thankful in all things, and **being submissive to ONE ANOTHER**. Ephesians 5:22-33, and 6:1-9 are a continuation of the same thought, as Paul breaks down how **being submissive and having God's love in our hearts** will show itself in husband and wife relationships, children and parent relationships, and even employer and employee (servant and master) relationships. Therefore, **a husband who is not LOVING his wife as Christ loved the church, in a sacrificial, giving manner**, cannot claim to be filled with the Spirit, no matter what "gifts" of the Spirit he may have.

- **Ephesians 5:18-26** "And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but **be filled with the Spirit**, speaking to one another psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord. Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **SUBMITTING** to one another in the fear of God. **Wives, SUBMIT to your own husbands, as to the Lord..... Husbands, LOVE your wives, just as Christ also LOVED the church** and gave Himself for it....."

Finally, there are three ways we can deal with passages in God's word regarding standards of behavior, dress, and so forth.

Method #1 - Legalism, which takes the literal meaning of the verse, but takes it out of context, and tries to force people to adhere to outward standards of behavior, without dealing with the person's heart and attitudes. Jesus spoke to the Pharisees about these kinds of issues, and so the term of being "pharisaical" is sometimes used. Jesus said the Pharisees washed the outside of the cup, meaning their lives, while the inside was full of rotteness and uncleanness. He called them whitewashed tombs, full of dead men's bones, because they thought they looked all shiny, clean and good on the outside to other people, but God saw the inward sin and hypocrisy in their hearts (read Matthew 23:1-36). Jesus taught that **the inner thoughts and motives of the heart** were as important as the outward keeping of the commandments, such as to not commit murder or adultery. He said that the hatred or lust in the heart of the person was the same as committing the outward act (see Matthew 5:20-28)

- **Matthew 23:25** "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.**"
- **I Samuel 16:7** "But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look at **his appearance** or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for **man looks at the outward appearance**, but **the Lord looks at the HEART.**"
- **John 7:24** "**Do not judge according to appearance**, but judge with righteous judgment."
- **James 4:8** "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and **PURIFY your HEARTS**, you double-minded."
- **Psalms 51:3, 10** "For I acknowledge my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me." "Create in me a **CLEAN HEART**, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

Method #2 - The correct way to deal with these kinds of Bible passages is to read them in context, first of all, and then study God's word to see where more light is shed on the topic. Look for the principle that God is teaching through the passage and other related passages. For instance, Jesus seems very severe in speaking to the Pharisees about marriage and

divorce, and if you only read Mark 10:11-12, it would seem that anyone who divorces and remarries is committing adultery. Some legalistic churches therefore say that no one who is divorced can ever remarry, unless their spouse dies. However, Jesus also said that in cases of adultery by one spouse, the other party is free to not only divorce, but also to remarry (Matthew 19:9). Then, Paul, in I Corinthians 7 goes into much more detail of instances and scenarios where one spouse might leave and/or divorce the other. The principle being taught is that marriage is a serious commitment, and divorce should only be in severe cases. We must look at **"the whole counsel of God" on every matter** (Acts 20:27), not just take one or two verses out of context and build a "church doctrine" of some kind out of it.

The biblically correct way to deal with church members who are living a lifestyle that is contrary to the word of God is first of all to **teach them the truth of God's word**. A pastor should be preaching messages that not only reach the more mature members of the congregation, but he should regularly go over the basics of the Christian walk or lifestyle. There should be discipleship classes, or individuals who will take a new Christian under their wing, so to speak, to teach them what is right and wrong according to God's standards. In our society today, many people don't even know the Ten Commandments, much less the finer points of godly Christian behavior. This is all a part of growing and maturing in Christ, and **we must allow the Holy Spirit to bring new believers under conviction when they hear the word of God taught on these subjects**. If someone is not a new believer, and is just being rebellious in continuing in sin, the Bible gives us directions for church discipline. This paper is not meant to cover the whole subject of church discipline, but see Matthew 18:15-17, and I Corinthians 5:1-13.

Method #3 - License, Lack of Moral Standards, and Conforming to the World's Standards. The other extreme from legalism is churches that never address any problems of sin or discipline among their members, and allow adultery, fornication (both heterosexual and homosexual), immodest dressing, gossip and backbiting, drunkenness, and other sins to go unchecked. They have a **mistaken idea** that we are never allowed to "judge" one another, and the Scripture verse they use is Matthew 7:1, "Judge not, lest you be judged." However, most people stop reading at that verse, instead of reading it in context. If you read **all of what Jesus was saying**, you see that He is only talking about the kind of "judging" that involves going around **trying to "fix" everybody else's life**, when your own life is still messed up! (Matthew 7:4-5) Notice, Jesus says **FIRST** remove the plank or log from your own eye, and **THEN you will see clearly** to remove the speck from your brother's eye. Obviously, that means there IS a time and place for one to "see clearly" and judge someone else's life. If you see someone actually committing a sin, or someone sins against you, the Bible tells you what to do in Matthew 18:15-17. **Jesus says in Matthew 18:15 to go DIRECTLY to the ONE who has OFFENDED you**, and try to resolve the issue with that person, especially if it is a "brother" in the church. **Gossip happens when you DO NOT OBEY the words of Jesus**, but you go around behind the person's back, and **gossip and tell everyone else** how that brother or sister has offended you! That is wrong, and it brings DISCORD, strife, division and confusion to the church of Christ! God hates when people jump to conclusions, make judgments without knowing the facts, and then spread rumors based on their unfounded conclusions! (see Proverbs 6:16-19).

- **John 7:24** "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with **righteous judgment**."
- **Galatians 6:1** "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass (sin), you who are spiritual (spiritually mature), **restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness**, looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted."
- **Matthew 7:4-5** "Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye (get rid of your own character defects); and **then you will see clearly enough** to take the speck out of your brother's eye."