

LIBERTY IN CHRIST: Holiness =/= Legalism

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I clearly remember running down the street in 1998, frantically looking under every car for a gum wrapper I'd failed to throw in the public trash can. After more than 15 minutes, I found it, and unspeakable joy (and relief) hit me. Why? Because I truly believed that if Christ re-turned before I properly disposed of that wrapper, I would not make it to heaven. My spiritual training said littering was not only lawbreaking; it was sin, and dying in my sin would have sent me to hell.

That might sound foolish to you, and you might be tempted to laugh at my line of thinking. But in my early walk with Christ (and for many years after that), thoughts like that plagued me—even through my nine-year prison term and long after my release. I had a condition I call OCRD, or obsessive-compulsive religious disorder. I was so afraid of not making the rapture that I kept apologizing and asking people I might have offended to forgive me. Gripped by the compulsion to walk in absolute holiness, I became miserable and mentally tormented, terrified to think the lake of fire would be my place of eternal unrest.

Break Out and Get Free!

A system of belief controlled me—yes, manipulated me. Thank God for the freedom I found in Christ—but it took me 10 or 15 years to get there! Honestly, legalistic ideologies still trip me up at times. My wife, Ibelize, can detect my bouts with

legalism, and she has helped me break out of them along with the principles I've learned and captured in my new book, *Manipulated*. Applying them has moved me away from the toxicity of legalism and into the liberty with which Christ made me free. It was a real-life battle with legalism, and I will share the liberty I found. But first, let me explain legalism and its root.

What Is Legalism?

According to Merriam-Webster, legalism is a "strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code...a legal term or rule."¹ I can attest that in legalistic churches, the word strict is an understatement. I'm not saying these churches are without love; I'm saying their primary cultural expression is conformity to their religious code.

Legalism demands strict rules, prescribed ways of dealing with others, rigid bylaws, and more. In place of a Christianity built on vibrant relationship, there's a regimen of mechanical coercion. Instead of a proper exegesis of Scripture—noting the context, when the text was written and to whom it was written—a blind literalism defines the reader's understanding and obedience. Believers in this setting are compelled to obey the text's literal form at all costs, often to the point of speaking, looking, and dressing like Old Testament figures.

The excessive conformity I just described controls a church's overall culture and silences the individual. Fierce conviction overshadows critical thinking, and no one dares challenge what the larger group has broadly accepted. This is called groupthink, "a pattern of thought characterized by self-deception, forced manufacture of consent, and conformity to group values and ethics." In this type of corporate legalism, no one wants to be the oddball, so everyone goes with the herd. A powerful fear of rejection keeps legalism in place. It's the reason people stay in churches they know are toxic.

Holiness $\neq$ Legalism

Does that mean holiness is wrong? No! Holiness couldn't possibly be wrong; our God is holy, we are called to be holy, and we are to worship the Lord in holiness. (See Leviticus 19:2; Deuteronomy 14:2; and Psalm 96:9.) But legalism is definitely wrong. So, I am not equating holiness with legalism. Yet many believers trying to walk holy accept legalism as the standard. This misunderstanding can damage their faith, shipwreck their family and other relationships, and draw them away from the Lord and His church.

The apostle Paul dealt with legalism in the church at Colossae. People known as Judaizers followed Paul's apostolic missionary work and infiltrated the churches he founded, looking to force Gentile believers in Christ to accept the Jewish rite of circumcision. This ideology became a stronghold in the early church, and the Judaizers became known as "the circumcision."

In Acts 15 the church called a convocation to address this issue. At one point, the apostle Paul publicly refuted the hypocrisy of the apostle Peter, who had flip-flopped on this matter. (See Galatians 2:11–21.) In his letter to the church at Colossae, Paul explained the doctrinal and theological fallacies that drove the controversy: "Therefore, if you died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you subject yourself to legalistic rules? 'Do not touch! Do not taste! Do not handle!' These all are to perish with use and are aligned with the commandments and doctrines of men. These things have indeed a show of wisdom in self-imposed worship and humility and neglecting of the body, but are worthless against the indulgence of the flesh," (Col. 2:20–23, MEV).

Paul did not name holiness as a problem. He simply pointed out how rules and regulations were drawing the Colossians away from dependence on the person of Christ, His finished work on

the cross and the person of the Holy Spirit, while driving them toward human-based rules for Christian discipline. The church at Colossae made the quality of their obedience the center point of their faith. This works-based gospel threatened to replace the faith-based gospel Paul (and of course Jesus) preached.

Without realizing it many believers who embrace a “holiness gospel” end up under the spell of a different spirit. As a result, they worship a different Jesus from the One they first followed. Anything that is not centered around the person of Jesus Christ or the efficacy of His work on the cross is legalism and not genuine biblical holiness. And anything that focuses more on what the believer does than on what Jesus has already done is not biblical Christianity; it is pietism!

Pietism is an “emphasis on devotional experience and practices; affectation of devotion.” If that doesn’t describe hyperlegalism, I don’t know what does! Among legalists there is a certain affection for the preaching of devotion instead of the preaching of Christ. I am not saying that legalists aren’t preaching Christ at all, but they emphasize being on fire for Christ more than they stress abiding in Christ. Such preaching and teaching ultimately produce a toxic Christianity because legalism is inherently toxic. That is why Paul was so determined to address the matter in his epistles!

Many misunderstandings of Scripture can blind us, and legalism is one of them. The psalmist wrote, “Open my eyes to see the wonderful truths in your instructions” (Ps. 119:18). I urge you to pray this verse and humbly ask the Holy Spirit to give you the full understanding of all that you read in the coming chapters of this book. Then pray the prayer that follows this paragraph. Let the Holy Spirit give you mental clarity and convict you of any areas in which legalism has robbed the freedom Christ purchased for you. May the Spirit give you the strength to stand against legalism, even as you pray.

Let us pray...

Lord Jesus, thank You for the cross and for purchasing my freedom from legalism. Thank You for sending the Comforter to help me walk in what You accomplished. Holy Spirit, I ask You to open my eyes to the dangers of legalism. Show me where it is affecting my life. Guide my steps as I totally depend on the Word as the source of truth. Show me the wonderful truths in Your instruction! Heavenly Father, give me strength to make whatever changes are necessary to stand fast in Christ, unentangled by yokes of bondage. I ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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