

8 Signs of a Legalistic Spirit—and How to Break Free

Do you truly enjoy the grace of God? Many Christians know the Bible, attend church and even do ministry work while they struggle to understand the core of the gospel. They can quote Scriptures about what Christ did for them, but they still feel they must work to earn His love—and often they end up feeling unworthy and separated from God.

Even though Jesus died on the cross so we wouldn't have to be judged according to the law, many Christians are still living in the Old Testament. They have never embraced the reality of New Testament faith. They are slaves to performance-based religion.

The apostle Paul wrote the epistle of Galatians to challenge us to make sure we remain in the grace of God. Do you struggle with legalism? Here are the most common signs of a legalistic spirit:

1. Lack of true joy. Jesus didn't forgive us of our sins so we could be sour-faced and sad. Yet I've met hundreds of Christians who looked like they were attending a funeral when they came to a church service. Why? Legalism kills joy. When someone has an encounter with God's mercy, their hearts always overflow with praise and gratitude. The apostle Paul wrote: "The kingdom of God is ... righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). There's no such thing as Christianity without joy.

2. No real victory over sin. All Christians struggle with temptations. But a person with a legalistic mindset finds it difficult to receive the grace of God to overcome sinful habits. Are you striving to break free from a particular sin in your own strength? You cannot do this on your own! We must

admit our weakness and to invite the Holy Spirit to give us supernatural power to live a holy life. It is the indwelling Spirit of Christ who gives us victory—not your straining and sweating. Relax and let Him live His life in you!

3. Unhealthy performance orientation. God is a loving Father, and He wants us to lavish us with His affirmation and encouragement. Yet many Christians don't have a revelation of God's unconditional love. They feel they must earn His love by reading the Bible, praying and performing other religious tasks. Do you ever feel God is mad at you because you overslept and missed your morning devotions? He wants you to spend time with Him, but not to fulfill a duty. Chill out and just enjoy His love!

4. A critical, unloving attitude toward others. People who don't understand God's grace cannot extend grace to anyone else. This is why some Christians are hateful toward unbelievers. When you understand how much mercy God extended to forgive you, it's easy to show mercy to other people who don't deserve it! When you hear Christians using harsh language to condemn Muslims, atheists, liberals or gay people, you have just identified a legalistic spirit.

5. Obsessive focus on outward standards of dress or behavior. Some Christian denominations have taught that God demands strict conformity to dress codes. Some churches in the past have condemned makeup, jewelry, pants and short hair for women. Others taught it was wrong for Christians to play sports, play cards, dance, wear wedding rings, go to movies, wear jeans in church or even own a television! Yet God emphasizes inner holiness rather than outward conformity. When you walk in grace, the Spirit will lead you to dress and act in a way that honors Him, but this will not conform to a man-made religious code.

6. Bondage to religious tradition. The Pharisees rejected Jesus because they couldn't leave Old Covenant religion

behind. A legalistic spirit says, "This is the way we've always done it." Some people rejected a new move of the Holy Spirit because they didn't like a new style of music. Some churches today are in danger of missing God because they want to live like it is still 1973. Legalistic people tend to fight any new move of God. Remember: God is unchangeable in His nature, but He does new things. We must stay in step with Him.

7. A sectarian attitude toward other Christians. People who don't understand God's grace believe they have a corner on truth, so they cannot accept the fact that the Holy Spirit might be moving in other denominations. Some churches even teach that they are the only people going to heaven. If your church believes they are the only true Christians, exit quickly. Legalism is toxic! Find a church that embraces the whole body of Christ.

8. Little or no assurance of salvation. People with a legalistic mindset often doubt their salvation because they trust their own obedience instead of Christ. When you receive the grace of God, the Bible says your heart will cry out, "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15). One true encounter with Jesus will cause you to know that God has adopted you—and that He will never abandon you.

The apostle Paul wrote: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17). If you haven't experienced this freedom, ask the Holy Spirit to fill every area where legalism has distorted your understanding of God.

Don't fall for a graceless Christianity. If you see any of these warning signs in your life, invite the Holy Spirit to set you free from legalism. Stop striving, repent of pride and ask God to open your eyes to the reality of His amazing grace.

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