

What's the Difference Between Holiness and Legalism?

Holiness is beautiful, legalism is binding; holiness brings life, legalism brings death. They are as different as night and day, and yet at first glance they can seem similar, because they both stand against sinful behavior and call for holy living. How can we distinguish between the two?

Legalism is rules without relationship, emphasizing standards more than the Savior, and laws more than love. It is a system based on fear and characterized by joyless judgmentalism, producing futility instead of freedom.

To an unsaved person, the legalist preaches justification by works, saying, "You're a wicked sinner and you need to get rid of all your filthy habits if you want the Lord to accept you." There is no grace in this message; no exalting of the life-changing, sin-cleansing power of the blood of Jesus; no clear proclamation of mercy.

The declaration of God's love expressed through the cross is muffled, if it is even heard at all. Consequently, the proof of the new birth is seen almost entirely in what someone no longer does, and this continues to be the pattern for believers within the church: They are judged almost entirely by a few external standards (which, in many cases, are not even expressly mentioned in the Word) and they are monitored by conformity to the particular group's code of conduct. The result is external conformity rather than inward transformation—and that means either self-righteousness or self-condemnation (or both!).

Of course, it is absolutely true that God has very high standards, and for anyone honestly reading the Word, there can be no doubt that He calls us to live by very high standards—in

our thoughts, words and deeds; in our attitudes; in our sexuality; in our families; in our relationships; and much, much more. (See Eph. 5:1-6.)

Tragically, legalists—despite their best intentions—get things terribly wrong. First, they try to change a person from the outside in, whereas God deals with us from the inside out. Second, they fail to present a balanced picture of the Lord, putting too little stress on His mercy and too much emphasis on His wrath. Third, they do not point the struggling sinner (or believer) to the Lord's supernatural empowerment, making holiness a matter of human effort alone. Finally, they add laws, standards, commandments, customs and traditions that are not found in the Word, making those things even more important than the biblical commandments themselves.

In contrast, true, scriptural holiness begins with the heart and flows from an encounter with God and His Word. It calls for repentance in response to the Lord's gracious offer of salvation and it offers a way to be holy—the blood of Jesus and the Spirit of God. Biblical holiness is free, although it requires discipline and perseverance. For the legalist, nothing is free. Everything must be earned! That's why legalism leads to bondage and holiness leads to liberty.

As Ralph Cudworth explained many years ago, "I do not mean by holiness the mere performance of outward duties of religion, coldly acted over, as a task; not our habitual prayings, hearings, fastings, multiplied one upon another (though these be all good, as subservient to a higher end); but I mean an inward soul and principle of divine life (Rom. 8:1-5), that spiriteth all these."

It is that inward spiritual principle that must be cultivated—the principle of intimacy with Jesus, the principle of being renewed in our minds by His Word and Spirit, the principle of being conformed to His image and character, hating what He hates and loving what He loves.

As Dr. Kent Hughes expressed in his book *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, "There is a universe of difference between the motivations behind legalism and discipline. Legalism says, 'I will do this thing to gain merit with God,' while discipline says, 'I will do this because I love God and want to please him.' Legalism is man-centered; discipline is God-centered."

Unfortunately, the moment you preach biblical holiness, many Christians put their hands over their ears and say, "That's legalism! That's condemnation! That's man-made religion! That's the dead letter of the law! You won't put me in bondage! I won't listen to stuff like that!" As Robert Brimstead observed, "The idea of living strictly by what the Bible says has been branded as legalism."

And so, these Christians run from the dangerous clutches of legalism and fall into the deadly grasp of license—that self-deceived state of fleshly liberty, catering to their carnality rather than crucifying it. What a terrible error!

Whatever comes naturally to these "liberated" believers is accepted as normal (and "understood," of course, by the Lord), while biblical commandments are brought down to the level of their own experience, and anything that brings any kind of spiritual pressure to bear on them is rejected as not being the easy yoke and light burden of Jesus. And when the Holy Spirit brings conviction on people like this, they rebuke the devil for trying to condemn them.

To quote Oswald Chambers, "Liberty means ability not to violate the law; license means personal insistence on doing what I like. ... To be free from the law means that I am the living law of God, there is no independence of God in my make-up. License is rebellion against all law. If my heart does not become the center of divine love, it may become the center of diabolical license."

What then is the antidote? Flee from legalism, stay far away

from license, and run to holiness. Reject humanly birthed, external religion. Give no place to false teaching that excuses carnality, and instead, embrace new covenant, heart transformation—and in the power of the Spirit, supernaturally enabled by God's grace, deal ruthlessly with sin in your life. That is the path to freedom!

(Adapted from *Go and Sin No More: A Call to Holiness*.)

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