

# God Loves You And People Have A Wonderful Plan For Your Life

If your life is ruled by do's and don'ts, maybe you've been listening to the wrong person.

**Legalism is a lack of faith.**

Pastor Eddie Ildefonso



Illustrations by Ron Bell

I want you to hear the following testimony from a fellow pastor friend of mine who lives in Long Beach, California:

“When my children were barely teenagers, our family went on vacation to a different part of the country to enjoy the beach and the ocean. When we got there, however, I discovered the beach was swarming with scantily clad young women. (I’m not talking about ordinary swimsuits. When I say scanty, I mean scanty.)

Now like Job, I had “made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl” (Job 31:1). I know I have not been as diligent as Job to stay faithful to that covenant, but at least I work at it. After about twenty minutes of continuously diverting my eyes, I said to my wife, “You and the kids stay as long as you like. I’m going to the car.”

Why did I do that? Because I knew myself well enough to know that after a while my commitment to visual purity

would wear thin. I knew that—given the continual temptations passing before me—in due time, I would succumb to the temptation to indulge a lustful look “just once” (which, of course, it never is).

So I built a “fence” for myself that day. I left the beach.

Now suppose, because of my experience, I concluded that going to the beach would always lead to sin. I could have said to my son, “You are not to go to the beach anymore.” I could have begun to look down my religious nose at others who went to the beach. I would have built a permanent fence: “Thou shalt not go to the beach.” In due time that fence would have had almost the same force in my thinking as the Ten Commandments, especially as I would use it to judge or influence others.”

That is the way a lot of manmade “do’s and don’ts” originate. They begin as a sincere effort to deal with real sin issues. But very often we begin to focus on the fence we’ve built instead of

the sin it was designed to guard against. We fight our battles in the wrong places; we deal with externals instead of the heart.

Fence-building can become just one form of legalism, which is anything we do or don't do in order to earn favor with God. Legalism insists on conformity to manmade religious rules and requirements, which are often unspoken but are nevertheless very real. We may force legalism on others, allow others to force it on us, or even force it on ourselves. But it is always conformity to how people (even ourselves) think we should live instead of how the Bible tells us to live. Like the Pharisees of Jesus' time, we have tried to "help" God by adding our manmade rules to His commands. Jesus' charge against the Pharisees, recorded in **Mark 7:6–8**, is still valid today:

***'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.***

This may seem like a rather severe charge to bring against contemporary Christianity, but there are far too many instances within Christendom where our traditions and rules are, in practice, more important than God's commands.

**Instead** of promoting freedom in Christ, we stress our rules of conformity. Instead of preaching living by grace, we preach living by performance. **Instead** of encouraging new believers to be conformed to Christ, we subtly insist that they be conformed to our particular style of Christian culture. We don't intend to do this and would earnestly deny we are. Yet that's the "bottom line" effect of most of our emphases in Christian circles today. Let's look at four ways we encourage legalism, beginning with the dilemma of fences I just described.

### **Fence-building**

When I was growing up, I was not allowed to go to the local pool halls. As I look back, I'm sure my parents did not want me to come under the influence of the unsavory characters who

frequented those halls. So they built a fence to keep that from happening: "Don't go into those pool halls." The problem was I didn't understand why, so I grew up thinking it was a sin to play pool (don't laugh, I really did). Imagine my consternation when I visited a Christian conference center and saw a beautiful antique pool table in the recreation room and godly men playing pool.

Should we scrap our fences, then? Not necessarily. Often they are helpful; sometimes they are necessary. Some years ago I realized I was craving ice cream to the point where I was not exercising responsible self-control. I had some every night at dinner and another dish at bedtime. So I built a fence. I asked my wife to no longer keep a regular supply of ice cream on hand. Only after my craving had been dealt with did we begin to have ice cream occasionally.

I think my parents' pool hall fence was appropriate. But there is a lesson in my experience for all parents: Don't focus on the fence. If you erect a fence for your children—for example, in regard to certain movies or television programs—be sure to focus on the real issues, not the fence. Take time to explain and re-explain the reason for the fence.

If I had said to my son, "You may not go to the beach," I would have failed him. He could have concluded that it was a sin to go to the beach (though he wouldn't understand why), and nothing would have been said about looking lustfully at the girls at school, or a dozen other places for that matter.

For all of us, it may be good to have some fences, but we have to work at keeping them as just that—fences, helpful to us but not necessarily applicable to others. We also have to work at guarding our freedom from other people's fences.

Some of the fences in our respective Christian circles have been around a long time. No one quite knows their origin, but by now they are "embedded in concrete." Although it may

cause conflict if you violate one, you must guard your freedom. To paraphrase Paul, “Stand firm in your freedom, and don’t let anyone bring you into bondage with their fences.”

I’m not suggesting you jump over fences just to thumb your nose at the people who hold to them so dearly. We are to **“make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19)**. Use discretion in embracing or rejecting a particular fence. But don’t let others coerce you with manmade rules. And ask God to help you see if you are subtly coercing or judging others with your own fences.

### Differing Opinions

A second area of legalism arises from believers holding differing opinions about certain practices. The Apostle Paul devoted an entire chapter of the book of Romans to this brand of legalism. In **Romans 14:1**, Paul called this problem **“disputable matters”** or, as I have called it, **differing opinions**.

The crux of the problem is stated well by Paul in **Romans 14:5**: **“One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”** People simply have different opinions about various issues. One person sees no problem in a certain practice; another person considers that practice to be sinful.

In *The Grace Awakening*, Charles Swindoll told of a missionary family who literally were forced off the mission field over peanut butter. They were sent to a location where peanut butter was not available, so they asked friends back in the States to occasionally send them some. The problem was that the other missionaries considered it a mark of spirituality *not* to have peanut butter. The newer missionary family considered this a matter of differing opinions, so they continued to receive and enjoy their peanut butter. But the pressure from the other missionaries to conform became so intense, the newer family finally gave up and left the mission field.

How could something like this—that probably seems petty and foolish to us—have happened? I imagine it developed something like this: A missionary family who greatly enjoyed peanut butter went to this particular mission field. They faced the choice of doing without it or asking friends or relatives in the States to send it to them. As they considered their options before the Lord, they came to the conclusion that doing without peanut butter was a small sacrifice to make. Though, like the Apostle Paul, they had a “right” to peanut butter, they chose not to use that right (**see 1 Cor. 9:1–12**). If my theory of this issue’s origin is correct, I personally find their thinking quite acceptable, perhaps even applaudable, in that circumstance. That’s Paul’s whole point in **Romans 14**. If they decided to give up peanut butter as to the Lord who am I to belittle or ridicule them? Paul said the man whose faith allows him to eat peanut butter must not look down on him who does not (Romans 14:3).

So what went wrong? My guess is that one family elevated the particular leading of God for them to the level of a spiritual principle, which they then applied to everyone: “If God has ‘led’ us to give up peanut butter on the mission field, surely that is His will for everyone else.”

When we think like that we are, so to speak, “putting God in a box.” We are insisting that He must surely lead everyone, as we believe He has led us. We refuse to allow God the freedom to deal with each of us as individuals. When we think like that, we are legalists.

We must not seek to bind the consciences of other believers with the private convictions that arise out of our personal walk with God. Even if you believe God has led you in developing those convictions, you still must not elevate them to the level of spiritual principles for everyone else to follow.

**Continued in next edition**



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