

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.

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Illustrations by Ron Bell

(continued from previous edition)

...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. The respected Puritan theologian John Owen taught, "Only what God has commanded in his word should be regarded as binding; in all else there may be liberty of actions." If we are going to enjoy the freedom we have in Christ, we must be alert to convictions that fall into the category of differing opinions.

Spiritual Disciplines

But what about the "do's?" By the "do's" I'm thinking particularly of activities I call spiritual disciplines: having regular private devotions, studying the Bible, memorizing Scripture, meeting with a Bible study

group, or faithfully attending a weekly prayer meeting.

Let me clearly say that I'm not out to disparage these disciplines at all. They are all good and helpful, and I seek to practice many of them myself. But spiritual disciplines are provided for our good, not for our bondage. They are privileges to be used, not duties to be performed. To take off on a familiar quotation from Jesus, "**Spiritual disciplines were made for man, not man for spiritual disciplines**" (see Mark 2:27).

We can become just as legalistic about our "do's" as we can about the "don'ts." In fact, newer believers coming into our fellowship from totally unchristian backgrounds usually don't have many cultural "don'ts." But the spiritual disciplines are fertile ground for legalistic thinking.

They can easily become a performance measurement by which we gauge whether to expect God's blessing or not.

If I've been doing pretty well, having a regular quiet time, studying my Bible, and so on, then I'm hopeful about God's blessing. But if I've not been doing so well—haven't "been faithful," as we say—then I might as well go back to bed.

We get even more legalistic about spiritual disciplines with others. We try subtle (or maybe not so subtle) coercion by communicating ever so slightly that a person who isn't practicing the same disciplines we are isn't "committed." Or we don't allow a person into our "**in**" group if he or she is not doing what we do. Again we think God should lead everyone else in spiritual growth as He does us.

I do think we should actively promote spiritual disciplines. They are absolutely necessary for growth in our Christian lives. But we should promote them as benefits, not as duties. Perhaps we should stop talking about being "faithful" to have a quiet time with God each day, as if we were doing something to earn a reward. It would be better to talk about the privilege of spending time with the God of the universe and the importance for our own sake of being consistent in that practice.

In a one-to-one discipling relationship, we should encourage the use of spiritual disciplines and do all we can to help the person succeed in them, but we should never require them as a condition of acceptance—either by God or by us. We must remember that the methods of spiritual disciplines are a means to the end, not the end themselves.

We need to teach grace before commitment, because grace understood and embraced will always lead to commitment. But commitment required will always lead to legalism.

What Others Think

Often we do not enjoy our freedom in Christ because we are afraid of what others will think. We do or don't do certain things because of a fear that we will be judged or gossiped about by others. But standing firm in our freedom in Christ means we resist the urge to live by the fear of what others think.

In Galatians, the Magna Charta of Christian freedom, Paul wrote, "**Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ**" (Galatians 1:10).

Listen to another testimony from a fellow pastor friend of mine:

"I had to learn this lesson the hard way. Surprisingly soon after the death of my first wife, God brought into my life another godly lady—a single woman who had been a family friend for many years. As our friendship began to deepen into a romantic relationship, I sensed an inner compulsion in my spirit, which I felt was from God, to move ahead. Yet, at the same time I became quite concerned about what people would think. I knew I would be violating the culturally accepted maxim of "don't make any major decisions the first year." My journal during those days records numerous times when I struggled with God over this issue.

I had put God in the box of our culturally accepted norm. Surely God wouldn't do anything in my life that would be unacceptable to my friends. God was actually doing a wonderful thing, but instead of fully enjoying His work of grace, I was struggling with Him because of what people might think."

If you are going to experience the joy of your freedom in Christ, you have to decide whether you will please God or people. I saw a cartoon one day that was a takeoff on one of Campus Crusade's Four Spiritual Laws. A wife, speaking to her husband who was obviously a minister, said, "God loves you, and people have a wonderful plan for your life." That cartoonist captured a spirit that is widespread in evangelicalism. Other people want to tell you how you should live the Christian life, what you shouldn't do and what you should do. Often their ideas will not match how you feel God is guiding you.

I'm not advocating that we run roughshod over other people's convictions. We are

called to a Body, and we all need to live and minister as members of the Body. But ultimately we are responsible to God, not other people. He is the One who puts us in the Body as He pleases. He deals with each of us individually, putting each of us in circumstances tailored especially for our growth and ministry.

A friend of mine ministers to international students from a very different cultural and political background. For some reason, the best time of the entire week to meet with them in an evangelistic Bible study is during the Sunday morning worship service. My friend went to his pastor, explained the situation, committed himself to attending the Sunday evening service, but asked to be excused from the morning service with the pastor's approval and blessing. Fortunately, the pastor understood and heartily granted his approval of my friend's plan.

But what if some people in the congregation didn't understand? What if the Sunday school superintendent didn't understand why my friend was unavailable to teach the college-age class? What are we to do in those situations? We are to exercise our freedom in Christ. If we believe God is guiding us in a certain direction, we have to obey God, not other people.

Controllers

We've talked about some of the areas in which we practice legalism with each other and with ourselves: fences, differing opinions, spiritual disciplines, and fear of what others think. There are others. Expected attendance at all church meetings, or at the activities of our various para-church organizations, is another fertile area for legalism. Another old bogey is "worldliness," which in the minds of some people can be seen in the amount of cosmetics a woman wears or the length of a man's hair.

Aggravating all of these areas is a class of people who have come to be known as "controllers." These are people who are not willing to let you live your life before God as you believe He is leading you. They have all the issues buttoned down and have cast-iron opinions about all of them. These people only know black and white.

There are no gray areas to them.

They insist you live your Christian life according to their rules and their opinions. If you insist on being free to live as God wants you to live, they will try to intimidate you and manipulate you one way or another. Their primary weapons are "guilt trips," rejection, or gossip.

These people must be resisted. We must not allow them to subvert the freedom we have in Christ. Paul treated the legalism in the Galatian church as heresy, and he called down a curse on its perpetrators. I am not prepared to go that far with our present-day legalists/controllers, but I want to tell you their actions are no incidental matter. Their presence in our evangelical ranks is much more than a minor irritant, such as a fly buzzing around our heads. There are spiritual casualties all over our nation today because of the effects of legalistic controllers in their lives.

Freedom and grace are two sides of the same coin. We cannot enjoy one without the other. If we are to truly live by grace, we must stand firm in the freedom that is ours in Christ Jesus.





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