

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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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 that 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. 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.