

3. The False Gospel of Legalism

Grace + Holy Spirit = Power

In 1944, during the Second World War, the British concocted an elaborate hoax to dupe Hitler into believing that the Allies were about to stage the bulk of the D-Day landings in Pas de Calais, France, rather than on the Normandy coast, many miles further south. This deception proved crucial in guaranteeing the invasion's success, allowing the Allies to gain a foothold while German forces were still waiting further north for what they thought would be the main attack. Polish citizens had broken the code that the Germans used to communicate, and the British created the Enigma code-breaking machine to continually look at German orders. Many believe this deception shortened the war and saved many lives. After the invasion, although the war lasted another nine months until Germany finally surrendered, the beginning of the end for Germany happened because of the success of the D-Day landings.

As Christians, we are also engaged in a war. It is a cosmic war that has been going on between light and darkness, God and Satan. Unseen spiritual forces are continually trying to gain the upper hand over the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. The beginning of the end for Satan and his demonic forces happened over 2000 years ago at the cross of Christ. Satan was completely defeated at the cross. Although he still retains a measure of power to use against the Church, he fights a losing battle all over the world where the gospel is being preached. One of his main tools against the world of unregenerate man and the Church of Jesus Christ is that of deception.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, ⁴in whose case the god of this world [Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

Our enemy, Satan, has formed strategies of deception to blind the minds of the unbelieving, and, if possible, the church as well, in order to keep her from being effective in her mission of preaching the gospel and making disciples (Matthew 28:19).

What strategies can you think of whereby the enemy deceives the unbelieving but also the church?

Although there are many different deceptions, today I want to focus on just one tactic in the enemy's tool chest, the deception of legalism.

Legalism, what is it?

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ²“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach ³therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. ⁴“They tie up heavy burdens

and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. ⁵"But they do all their deeds **to be noticed by men**; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments (Matthew 23:1-5).

Legalism is most popularly defined as redemption by human effort. It is an attempt to gain God's favor by our own good deeds or to impress those around us by doing or not doing certain things. The root of pride is central to legalism because people think that they will be commended by their deeds. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees were the legalists of Christ's day. Legalism became prominent in Israel after the dispersion of the Jews to Babylon in 586 BCE. Because of the prevalence of idol worship and the sacrifice of innocent children (as in the case of Manasseh, 2 Chronicles 33), among other things, God banished the children of Israel to servitude in Babylon for seventy years (Jeremiah 25:8-11).

When in Babylon, the Jewish people began to ask themselves why God had punished them by casting them out of the land that He had given them. Their conclusions were that they had broken the law of God and that the only thing to do was to build a fence around the law so that, if they did, perhaps, cross the fence, they would still not break the law. They developed a system of rules and interpretations, collectively called the Talmud, which would keep people from sinning against God. For example, the Scripture said that they were not to work on the Sabbath day, so they made up volumes of rules that defined what constituted work on the Sabbath.

If one had to rest on the Sabbath, how far could a person walk before it became work? They stipulated that a Jew could only walk 2000 cubits (1000 yards) from his house, but if a rope was tied across the end of the street, the end of the street became his house and he could go another 1,000 yards beyond that. However, if he needed to go further on the Sabbath evening, he could place enough food for two meals along the way, and where he left the food then that became his residence, and he could go another 1000 yards.¹ Living life became a system of rules that was concerned with outward details and looking good. Of course, the regular people could not keep such heavy rules that did not express God's heart of love. Trying to please God became a heavy burden that Jesus spoke against. Worse still, the religious elite did not practice these things themselves. Very little grace was extended until Jesus came along. Love and kindness to others became relegated to second place.

Living by religious rules has become part of normal Christianity. We see it so often we don't even think of it. I remember as a young Christian in England going to a small group of young people that I was helping to lead. I stopped at the one place that was open on the way to get some snacks for the youth meeting. This place happened to be an off-license. (A British off-license is similar to a liquor store in the USA, but it also sells all kinds of snacks.) As I came out of the shop with my snacks, an older lady who went to the church that I had been attending met me. She tore into me so badly, saying that it was Sunday and asked me why I, as a Christian, was visiting such a place as that on a Sunday. This

¹ <http://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/dsb/view.cgi?bk=41&ch=11>

was very early in my Christian walk, and it was very confusing to me. I remember shrinking away under a cloud of guilt.

[Share a story with one another of coming across rules and regulations in Christianity.](#)

After living in Israel for a year and a half, one of the things I became aware of quickly is the passion of religious Jews for everyone to keep the Law. I found out that they believe that, if they can get all Jews in the land to keep one Sabbath holy as a nation, then the Messiah will come. Now, of course, there is no Scripture to validate that. It is just a belief of those who are seeking to be righteous by keeping the fence around the Law. There are some areas of Jerusalem that your car will be stoned if you are caught driving on the Sabbath. There is a popular t-shirt for sale in Israel that alludes to the religious area with a double meaning that says, "I got stoned in Mea Shearim." It can be very frustrating even to be in a hotel on a Sabbath, for if you catch yourself in the wrong elevator, it will stop at all floors between your room and the lobby or restaurant because it is deemed as work for you to press the elevator button on the Sabbath.

Jesus was accused of being a lawbreaker, for instance, by healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:2). These laws, though, were not the law of God. They were the fence rules that were put around the Law. Jesus did not break the Law of God, but He came to fulfill the Law: **"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them"** (Matthew 5:17).

Why Was the Law Given?

This is important for us to understand, for the law was given to show God's righteous moral standard. The conscience, Puritan Richard Sibbes wrote in the seventeenth century, is *the soul reflecting upon itself*. Conscience is at the heart of what distinguishes the human creature. People, unlike animals, can contemplate their own actions and make moral self-evaluations. That is the very function of conscience. The problem with conscience is that it can be educated, ignored, and told to shut up. The law enlightens the conscience and gives a line in the sand that is objective. The law demands total obedience with an obligation to keep the whole law, not just a part. In the New Testament, James wrote, **"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it"** (James 2:10). The law defines what sin is. Until the gospel started to reach into the South and Central American jungle, it was quite okay to sacrifice innocent children; the Mayans and Inca's did it frequently. Men's conscience was overridden. Paul wrote that, without the law, we would not have known what sin is (Romans 7:7). When the law was given, man was without an excuse before a holy God and held accountable for his actions (Romans 3:19). None of us can keep the law. We all fall short (sin) of moral perfection and see ourselves as depraved individuals in need of a Savior from sin.

As a young person, I gave vent to my sin nature, but inside of me there was an uneasiness and guilt. My conscience told me that the way I was living was wrong. I tried to live a more moral life, and decided that I needed to uphold some sort of moral code and conviction to assuage my guilty feelings. Even though I knew virtually nothing about the

Bible and was very uneducated on the subject of religion, I felt drawn to the Ten Commandments. The more I tried to live by the Ten Commandments, the greater was my conviction that I couldn't keep the law. The worst part was that I found out that, if I didn't obey the law, a curse would fall upon me, "**Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out.**" (Deuteronomy 27:26)).

I stood guilty before God. It was only after many months of conviction under the law of God that I finally was led to Christ—the One who delivers from sin. This was why Christ had to be lifted up and hung on a tree. Paul the apostle explains: "**When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'**" (Galatians 3:13). He couldn't die by stoning, the normal penalty for blasphemy. Jesus had to be lifted up and hanged on a tree, the innocent Lamb of God taking upon Himself the curse. Christ took the penalty, the curse of the law, and lifted it from all who enter into the covenant that He instituted.

Did you try to live by a moral code, such as the Ten Commandments? Share your story of trying to be good. Do you remember a moment of failure or weakness that convinced you of your need?

Freedom from Slavery

It was President Abraham Lincoln who issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, as the nation approached its third year of bloody civil war. The proclamation declared, "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free." Thirty years before President Lincoln's Proclamation, you might not know that the British did the same to the slaves on the islands of the Caribbean that it controlled.

On the Island of Jamaica on July 31, 1838, a man named William Knibbs, gathered 10,000 slaves for a great praise gathering. They were celebrating the New Emancipation Proclamation Act that the British Empire had signed into law to abolish slavery on the island. They built an immense coffin, and into it were placed whips, branding irons, chains, fetters of all kinds, slave garments and all the things that represented the terrible slavery system that was now coming to a welcome end.

At the first stroke of the midnight bell, Knibbs shouted out, "The monster is dying." At each stroke of the bell that followed this cry was repeated and the great crowd began to join in the cry. At the twelfth stroke 10,000 voices cried out, "The monster is dead, the monster is dead, let us bury him." They then screwed the coffin lid down and lowered it into a huge grave and covered it up. That night, every heart rejoiced, and 10,000 voices grew hoarse, shouting and crying with joy. Once they were in bondage to slavery, but now they were free.

There is a tragic side to this story. While many rejoiced in their new liberty and freedom, there were some slaves, which lived in remote areas of this Caribbean island, which did not know they had legally been set free. Because they didn't know, for many years after

the Emancipation Proclamation had been made a law, they still continued to serve their slave masters. Their former masters successfully kept the news from them as long as they could. By law they had been declared free men and did not have to live as slaves any longer. However, ignorance of the truth kept them in bondage.

Now let me tell you an even sadder story. Today, if we hear a story of something like that happening, we'd be shocked, sympathetic, and even angry. However, the truth is that the same type of thing is happening in our day. Jesus Christ, because of His victory against sin on the cross, has issued an Emancipation Proclamation of liberty and freedom from sin to everyone on this earth. However, like some of the Jamaicans, there are those today that just don't understand that they no longer have to live as slaves to sin, and the devil is trying to deceive them by keeping them in that mind set. The message of the cross is this: Satan has been defeated, and sin's penalty has been paid. We no longer have to surrender to sin or be controlled by Satan. We can belong to Jesus and live to please God.² **“¹³For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” (Colossians 1:13).** When you believed and turned your life over to Christ, there was transference of your loyalties from Satan's kingdom to God's kingdom.

Although this is the reality of the believer, like the slave owners, Satan's strategy of deception is to keep us in the dark as to God's proclamation of deliverance from being slaves to sin. In Paul's letter to the Galatian church he wrote them in earnest about the gospel to which they were turning:

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! ⁹As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse! ¹⁰Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ (Galatians 1:6-10).

In his letter to the Galatian church, Paul is responding to opposition that had personally come against him and the message of salvation that he carried. With very few exceptions, all of Paul's letters were written to meet an immediate situation. In this letter to the Galatian church, there had come to the church individuals who were saying that Paul was not really an apostle and that they need not listen to what he had to say. They based their belittlement on the fact that he had not been one of the original twelve, and that, in fact, he had been the most savage of all persecutors of the church. Paul insisted that, although his message was received in entire independence, it had received the full approval of those who were the acknowledged leaders of the Christian Church (Galatians 2:6-10).

² <http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-bill-lobbs-stories-whatisevangelism-greatcommission-lordshipofchrist-1204.asp>

The gospel he preached came direct from God to him, but it was a gospel in full agreement with the faith delivered to the church. However, that gospel was under attack as well. It was a struggle for the truth and a battle that had to be fought. There were Jews who had accepted Christianity, but some believed that all God's promises and gifts were for Jews alone and that no Gentile could be admitted to these precious privileges. In contrast, the legalists said that, if a Gentile wished to become a Christian, let him become a Jew first. What did that mean? It meant that he must be circumcised, and to take on the whole burden of keeping the law. That, for Paul, was the opposite of all that Christianity meant. It meant that a man's salvation was dependent on his ability to keep the law and could be won by his own efforts; whereas, to Paul, salvation was entirely a thing of grace. That is why Paul calls what they are hearing "a different gospel" and warns them not to be moved away from the gospel of grace, which they first heard.

In our day, there are a number of different gospels that are not the gospel of Jesus Christ. Each of us has to discern as to what gospel we have believed. The true gospel of Jesus Christ is that which is owned by the Holy Spirit and has His blessing on it. It is the gospel of God's grace and 100% of what Christ has done, and not what we can add to it. It is grace + nothing. The law of God was given to lead us to trust completely in what Christ fulfilled for us on the cross. I am going to let you in on a secret. You may already know this, but we can never be "good enough" for God. That is the whole point. Somehow, as we begin to live out the Christian life, we can forget this. In Galatians 3:1-3 Paul said:

¹You foolish Galatians! Who has **bewitched** you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ²I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? ³Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? (Galatians 3:1-3).

Yet this is a common Christian experience. We start by acknowledging His grace when we are saved, and we then try and go it alone. We need to live in His grace and aware of our new identity in Christ. I have lived on three continents and been to thirty-two different countries of the world, but there is a big difference in those cultures where deceit and deception is the norm.

The Western world in its very structure has been one of grace and trust not only in God, but also in our fellow man, choosing to receive grace from God but also to give grace to those around us. There was a time in our Western culture when all that was needed to make a deal was a handshake. Sadly, we have far departed from that kind of grace and trust. Very few will trust just a handshake. The very fabric of society has been eroded. Daniel the prophet spoke about a time, which I believe is the present time in which we are now living, when the enemy **"...shall wear down the saints of the Most High"** (Daniel 7:25).

In verse one of the passage above, Galatians 3, Paul uses the Greek word, *baskainō*, translated *bewitched*, to describe Satan's work amongst the Galatian Church. This word

means to cast an evil spell, i.e. to bewitch.³ Satan had been at work among them to convince the church to begin living by rules and laws to complete their faith. It is similar to what is happening today. Many people start the Christian life by trusting in the grace of God to set them free from sin, but Satan steps in to keep us in bondage to all kinds of Christian rules that takes away from the grace and joy of the Lord. To the legalist of today, when Jesus shouted from the cross, “It is finished,” what He really meant is that it is nearly finished and that we have to add our works to complete Christ’s work. That is a lie out of the pit of hell! Salvation is totally a gift and something that Christ has completed. It is Christ plus nothing that will get us into heaven.

Paul said that the law was given to be a *pedagogue*, a tutor or child guardian:

²³Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴So **the law was our guardian** until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵Now that this faith has come, **we are no longer under a guardian** (Galatians 3:23-25).

Now that faith in Christ has come, we are no longer servants to sin and Satan; we are no longer under the keeping of a pedagogue, a child guardian, the law. We are now adults in our relationship to God. We no longer have to live by rules and keeping all kinds of laws to win favor before God, but we are born again, made alive, and full sons and daughters of God.

¹³When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, ¹⁴having **canceled out the certificate of debt** consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, **having nailed it to the cross** (Colossians 2:13-14).

What does the passage say has been nailed to the cross? What other things stand out to you from this passage? What are the practicalities?

The certificate of debt mentioned in the passage above is that we had a debt invoice against us due to our sin, but through the cross the Lord has paid the debt. The facts of the gospel are that we are completely delivered from Satan’s dominion into Christ’s kingdom and that God has nailed the curse to the tree of Christ’s cross. So, what should be the effect on our lives of the grace of God extended to us? Should we then set our standards upon others? C.S. Lewis says:

One of the marks of a certain type of bad man is that he cannot give up a thing himself without wanting everyone else to give it up. That is not the Christian way. An individual Christian may see fit to give up all sorts of things for special reasons—marriage, or meat, or beer, or the cinema; but the moment he starts saying the things are bad in themselves, or looking down his nose at other people

³ <http://biblehub.com/greek/940.htm>

who do use them, he has taken the wrong turning.⁴

We are not to be junior Holy Spirit to our brothers and sisters, but we are to come alongside one another and encourage, not to push our petty rules upon one another and judge others:

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God (Romans 14:1-6).

A gracious Christian is one who can accept another just where he is in his walk with God. The problem is that, for some reason, human nature finds it hard to relinquish control and to trust in the perfect work of Christ. It's too easy, people say. They want to do something to earn salvation, but salvation is a free gift, it's Christ plus nothing. The famous hymn says, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling." When presented with the true Gospel of Christ, I have often heard people respond with the words; "I feel that I am a good person. I have always tried to help people, etc." They are totally missing the point. It's like a person going down to an airport to fly to Europe. Getting in line, he is asked for his ticket. Can he ask for a piece of paper and write out a ticket for himself? Of course not! We must come to God on His terms, not ours. None of us are good enough to bring to the table what is necessary. We are told in Isaiah 1:18:

"Come now, let us settle the matter," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

Here is an interesting picture. Imagine that God has invited you to sit down at a table and reason with Him. How are we to reason together with God? Have you ever really thought about that? He invites us to reason with Him. Some people try to reason with God by presenting their good works, their sacrifices, and good intentions. Reasoning together, or debating was –and still is –a favorite pastime of the Jews. They love to reason back and forth. This is what goes on a great deal in the Yeshivas, the learning centers in the Jewish community even today. It is worth noting that, even when Jesus talked to people, He often reasoned with them, answering a question with another question.

⁴ <http://befullyaliveinchrist.blogspot.com/2010/08/sunday-salt-cs-lewis-exposes-our.html>
C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 76 (Touchstone edition; 1996).

The point is that God asks us to reason with Him over this problem of sin, and He then gives us the answer. The answer He gives is 100% based on what He brings to the table. He says that even though our sins are as red as scarlet, they will be white as snow. He is the One that wipes out the darkness, and it is His work, totally. He is just waiting for us to realize this, inviting us to reason with Him, and to come to this conclusion. What a gracious God we serve!

Prayer: Father, we ask that we would be aware of Satan's strategies of deception to keep us from the path of grace. Thank You for your great love for us. May we continually cling to the true gospel of the Lord Jesus. Amen!

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