

The Doctrine of Legalism

These studies are designed for believers in Jesus Christ only. If you have exercised faith in Christ, then you are in the right place. If you have not, then you need to heed the words of our Lord, Who said, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten [or, uniquely-born] Son, so that every [one] believing [or, trusting] in Him shall not perish, but shall be have eternal life! For God did not send His Son into the world so that He should judge the world, but so that the world shall be saved through Him. The one believing [or, trusting] in Him is not judged, but the one not believing has already been judged, because he has not believed in the Name of the only-begotten [or, uniquely-born] Son of God." (John 3:16–18). "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life! No one comes to the Father except through [or, by means of] Me!" (John 14:6).

Every study of the Word of God ought to be preceded by a naming of your sins to God. This restores you to fellowship with God (1John 1:8–10). If we acknowledge our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1John 1:9). If there are people around, you would name these sins silently. If there is no one around, then it does not matter if you name them silently or whether you speak aloud.

Preface: The two items above are particularly fundamental to this study. Salvation comes from faith in Christ, which involves absolutely no merit on the part of the person who believes in Him. We are saved on the basis of what Christ did for us on the cross; not on the basis of anything else. Similarly, spiritually is the filling of the Spirit, which comes from the confession of sin when one is out of fellowship. God forgives us our sins, not because we promise never to do it again and not because we are ashamed of our actions, but because our sins were forgiven by Him on the cross.

Rom. 11:6 **Now if by grace, then it is not by works; otherwise grace ceases to be grace.** (HCSB)

Grace Notes: Our human system of work and reward is like this: I work for you and you pay me. This is obviously legitimate, it's the way commerce works under divine institutions and free enterprise. But the religious legalist is convinced that God works by the same system - or at least he hopes so. He says: I work for God and God rewards me by saving me and blessing me in some way. That's not how God operates. He has no need or desire for our works; in fact, our works are offensive to Him. Isa. 64:6, "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags..." If I try to impress God with my works, He discards them as filthy rags.

Charts, Maps and Short Doctrines

The Concept of Legalism	Legalism and Salvation	Legalism and Spirituality
Legalism and the Christian Life	Legalism and the Grace Apparatus for Perception	Legalism and False Systems of Production

Legalism in Bible Times/ Legalism Today	Legalism and the Book of Galatians	Illustrations from Rom. 14
The Abbreviated Doctrine of Legalism		Bibliography

Preface: The concept of legalism is fairly simple: there is something that you can do before or after salvation that is meritorious and gains the approval and therefore the grace of God. Much of the information below principally came from two websites, which are named in the biography at the end.

1. Fundamental to understanding legalism, is to understand the concept of *grace*. Grace is all that God is free to do for mankind because of the work that has been done on our behalf by the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross. Grace means that man has received from God that which he has not earned or deserved. Nothing that we are, and nothing that we can do, is enough to qualify us for anything that the Lord has to give us. In fact, our human works are a matter of arrogance, which God will not tolerate. Isa. 64:6 describes how God views our works: *All our righteousnesses are as filthy [lit., *menstruous*] rags in His sight.*
2. The concept of legalism:
 - 1) Legalism is the belief that you can do something meritorious and thereby be rewarded in some way by God for doing good works or following some religious system of customs, laws and/or rituals.
 - 2) *Legalism* connotes any system of merit, by which a person tries to please God, or to assist God, or to glorify God by means of his own human power.
 - 3) Religious legalism promotes a system of works as man's approach to God. Religious legalism is whatever system that teaches that a person can do something to earn or merit salvation or blessing from God.
 - 4) Religious legalism also refers to any system of religious bondage imposed on someone by another individual, or by an organization, that attempts to make that person a practitioner of legalism. Often, bullying tactics or ostracism are used to keep people in line.
 - 5) Legalism includes the concept that God will bless, help, and prosper the one living according to whatever legalistic standards have been established. These standards may be the application of the norms and standards or society, some subgroup of society (a particular church or denomination), or from a misinterpretation of the Bible (e.g., Sabbath-keeping in the Church Age).
 - 6) Therefore, legalism is the belief in and the practice of human religious regulations and taboos because one believes *that* is the way to please God, to become spiritual, and to live the Christian life. Legalistic people, because they work for God's blessing, often confuse cause and result, and thereby misunderstand grace.
3. There are four principal spiritual transactions in which human works are not acceptable to God: salvation, spirituality, spiritual growth (resulting in spiritual maturity), and eternal rewards. Very



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briefly, legalism is against salvation by grace (Gal. 1:6–9 2:16), spirituality by grace (Gal. 3:2–5 5:5), and the freedom to live the Christian way of life by grace—which is the freedom to live apart from pressure imposed by a religious community or a taboo list (Gal. 4:8–11 5:1–5).

4. As an aside, Satan has two overall strategies with regards to people on this earth: (1) to keep them from the gospel; and (2) for those who have believed in Jesus Christ, to neutralize their spiritual lives. Huge numbers of believers have had their spiritual lives neutralized by legalism (which means, nearly nothing of what they do on this earth has any eternal consequence). Legalism is used by Satan to accomplish both of these objectives.
5. Legalism and salvation:
 - 1) Legalism in salvation is the concept that you must do something more than have faith in Christ in order to gain God's approval (or you must do something other than or in addition to exercising faith in Christ). That is, even in some legalistic Christian faiths, there is the belief that there is a set of additional works that must be done or some often poorly-defined set of minimal standards which must be adhered to. If you do not meet those standards, then you did not really believe in the first place; or you had a head belief, but not a heart belief. Let me emphasize that this is a false view of salvation.
 - 2) There are many religious systems which teach salvation by works, or which try to mix works with faith, such as:
 - (1) Believe + keep the Law of Moses.
 - (2) Believe + be circumcised.
 - (3) Believe + water baptism.
 - (4) Believe + confess your sins.
 - (5) Believe + give up your bad habits and fully surrender; make Jesus Lord of all.
 - (6) Believe + make a public display or some sort (come forward or raise your hand); or have great sorrow of a show of tears.
 - (7) Believe + join a church.
 - (8) Believe + live some minimal sort of Christian life. This is what is found most often in today's Christianity. Those who promote this sort of legalism will never state it in this way, but they will carefully explain, "If you still do thus-and-so, maybe you did not really believe in Jesus in the first place." Or, "Maybe you have a head belief but not a heart belief." If there is no evidence of salvation, then, perhaps you were never really saved. "After all," they will tell you, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature;" (not understanding what they have just said). This is the most insidious attack upon salvation. The believer who is under attack for not acting like a Christian then has two ways to go: he can abandon his faith altogether because he did not have enough faith or he can enter into a life of legalism, adhering to whatever set of standards that quasi-Christian group has established.
 - (9) What is added to faith is just a matter of the time and place; Christian converts in Paul's day were told they needed to believe and be circumcised; it is unlikely that any significant group of legalists today adds circumcision to faith in Christ.
 - (10) However, the gospel of Jesus Christ is to have faith alone in Christ alone; it is believe + nothing. Placing your faith in Jesus Christ is a non-meritorious choice; and that is our only means to connect with God. We have no other means by which we can initially establish a relationship with God. Jesus said to Thomas, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by Me." (John 14:6). God saved you through faith as an act of kindness. You had nothing to do with it. Being saved is a gift from God.



From [blogspot](#)

It's not the result of anything you've done, so no one can brag about it (Eph. 2:8–9; God's Word™).

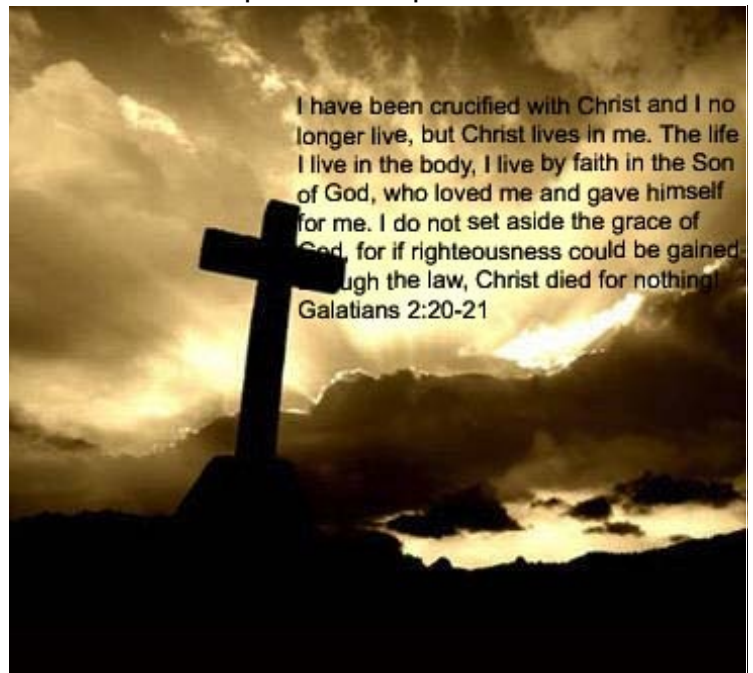
- 3) Legalism is diametrically opposed to salvation by grace. Gal. 1:6-9 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him Who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we [originally] preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (WEB, slightly modified) Gal. 2:16 Still we know that a person is not justified [i.e., made right with God] by [perfect obedience to] the law of Moses, but rather through faith in [the person and work of] Christ. [Knowing this] we have trusted in Christ Jesus [to save us], so that we might be made right with God by trusting in Him and not by [our compliance with] the requirements of the law of Moses. Because by such law-compliance no one can be made right with God. (AUV–NT)
- 4) Rom. 4:4–5 Now wages are not considered a gift if the person has to work for them, but [rather] an obligation [of his employer]. But to the person who believes in God, who makes ungodly people right with Himself apart from doing good deeds, that person's faith is considered by God [as the basis] for being righteous. (AUV–NT) Or, to state this in a different way, how can salvation be the *gift of God* if you have to work for it?
- 5) Legalism becomes a heavy yoke or load to live under. No man has the ability to impress, bribe, coerce, or trick God into giving him salvation. The attempt to work for your salvation is taking on an impossible burden. In Matt. 11.28–30, [Jesus said], “Come to Me, all of you who are overworked and overburdened and I will give you rest [i.e., spiritual refreshment]. Accept My reins [on your life], and learn about Me, because I am gentle and humble, and [in My service] you will experience rest in your spirits. For My reins [on your life] are easy [to respond to] and the burden I place [on you] is light.” (AUV–NT; pronouns referring to Jesus are capitalized)
6. Legalism and fellowship with God:
 - 1) Grace is the means by which our fellowship with God is restored. We name our sins to God and God forgives us these sins. 1Cor. 11:31 1John 1:9
 - 2) We are forgiven, not because we feel badly, we do penance, we promise never to commit that sin again; we are forgiven because Jesus Christ died for that sin on the cross. The means by which our fellowship is restored is based upon grace, and not upon legalism. Again, that means is naming our sins.
 - 3) This naming of our sins both restores our fellowship with God and resumes the filling ministry of the Holy Spirit. Being led by the Spirit is not a 50-50 proposition; we are either led by the Spirit or we are not. 1John 3
 - 4) Legalism is using some meritorious system in order to get back into fellowship (into God's good graces, so-to-speak). This could include penance, begging for forgiveness, promising never to commit a particular sin again, promising God an overall improvement in your life, working up a deep sorrow over your sins, etc.
 - 5) Some adherence to certain norms and standards are not wrong—such as functioning under the laws of divine establishment, which is a divine code designed for all people in all nations. Adhering to the laws of divine establishment make you a better person socially, and this adherence makes for a better nation, but it does not make you spiritual. You can be a good person in society, and yet not filled with the Holy Spirit.
7. Legalism and the Christian life:
 - 1) After salvation, legalism is abandoning grace as the basis of our spiritual lives.

- 2) If we are saved by grace, then it is logical that spirituality and spiritual growth are also by grace. Gal. 3.2–5 **Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain--if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? (ESV, mostly)** Gal. 5:1 **For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (ESV)**
- 3) As believers in Jesus Christ, we have the freedom to live the Christian way of life by grace—which includes the freedom to live apart from pressure imposed by a religious community or a list of taboos. Gal. 4.8–11 **Previously, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and empty elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once again? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. See also Gal. 5.1–6.**
- 4) Some forms of legalism are easy to define; e.g, Legalism is the belief in and the practice of human religious regulations and taboos because one believes that is the way to please God, become spiritual, and live the Christian life. This could include tithing, going to church, and not doing the things which some sub-group of Christians tell you not to do.
- 5) Legalism is a set of do's or don't's, adherence to which mean that a person is spiritual or a good Christian. Here is the problem: with a list of do's and don't's, quite obviously, Charley might be better than Lucy who might be better than Linus when it comes to adherence to this list. However, in the Christian life, there is no such thing as a 50 percenter. You are saved or you are not; you are spiritual or you are not. Now, there are different stages of growth, but this is completely different from imperfectly following a list of do's and don't's.
8. Legalism versus grace apparatus for perception:
 - 1) Grace apparatus for perception is terminology developed by R. B. Thieme, Jr., which means that all believers have the same ability to grow through knowledge of Bible doctrine and the same ability to be productive in the plan of God, no matter what their mental or physical deficiencies. If a person is able to understand the gospel and to believe in Jesus Christ, then he is able to execute the Christian way of life as a mature believer. We all reach spiritual maturity in the same way: God's grace system, which is the ability to understand with all the saints what the will of God is. Eph. 3:18–19
 - 2) Every believer has the same crack at the Christian way of life—including Christian maturity—whether they have an IQ of 70 or of 130.
 - 3) The full doctrine of the grace apparatus for perception is found [here](#) and [here](#).
 - 4) Examples of legalism in the Christian Life, which are also examples of pseudo-spirituality and the pseudo Christian life. These are things that Christian churches, groups and believers do, instead of actually growing in grace and the knowledge of God's Word.
 - (1) Taboos: thinking one is spiritual because he doesn't do certain things or follows a certain do's and don't's. I don't know that this is really much of a part of mainstream Christianity as it used to be.
 - (2) Imitating Personalities: the idea that living the Christian life is conformity in dress, mannerisms, speech, etc. I have observed this, and it is quite entertaining, but unrelated to the spiritual life. This can occur in all kinds of churches. How many Sunday School teachers at Berachah Church attempted to imitate Bob's personality when teaching young children?

- (3) Relative Righteousness: "your sins are worse than mine, therefore I am more spiritual" or "I am spiritual and you are carnal." Spiritually is an absolute state—you are or you are not.
 - (4) Ecstasies: spirituality by speaking in tongues, groaning, getting in a trance, fainting. This is a very big deal today (primarily the speaking in tongues and the trance-like states) and has been a corruption of the Christian life for over a century now.
 - (5) Asceticism: spirituality by self-sacrifice or extreme self-denial; giving up normal activities or even necessities in the mistaken notion that God is impressed. This is not generally found in the U.S. anymore, where we tend to be very self-indulgent; but is more common outside of the U.S. This is a very big deal in monasteries.
 - (6) Ritualism: This is the idea that one is spiritual or growing because he goes through various forms of ceremony or ritual. Spiritual maturity is ascribed to those who do this and look really holy while doing it. In the Apostle's day, the Jews promoted circumcision as necessary to the Christian walk. These days, any sort of ritual may be used, including singing (I am not saying that singing is wrong, but it is mostly unrelated to spiritual growth, unless one concentrates on the words and the words are Biblically accurate).
 - (7) These examples often take the place of spiritual growth. That is, instead of being filled with the Spirit and learning Bible doctrine and growing, one or more of these other things are offered up instead.
 - (8) This describes most churches today. They practice various forms of legalism, rather than the filling of the Holy Spirit (by naming one's sins to God—1John 1:9) and **growing in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ** (2Peter 3:18).
9. Legalism and false systems of production:
- 1) One of the biggest problems of legalism is, confusing means with results. Legalism posits the idea that you are spiritual if you are faithful in praying, giving, witnessing, attending church, and so forth. But these legitimate activities are a result of Christian growth and the filling of the Holy Spirit. When the emphasis is placed upon doing these things, that is putting the cart before the horse. These things are not the means for spirituality or growth in Christ.
 - 2) The grace principle is this: when you are in fellowship, occupied with Christ, and controlled by the Holy Spirit, all of your activities bring eternal reward (gold, silver, precious stones—1Cor. 3:10–14). You are producing divine good, and the spiritual power for your efforts comes from God as a grace provision. The amount that you produce is, of course, limited or enhanced by your spiritual growth.
 - 3) When you are out of fellowship (with unconfessed sin), you are occupied with yourself, you control yourself, everything is chaos. You therefore produce human good (wood, hay, and stubble—1Cor. 3:10–14). There is no spiritual power supporting your efforts, and there is no reward for them in heaven. This describes most believers today. Most believers today spend a majority of their time out of fellowship, and they only get back into fellowship by accident (they shock themselves so much with a series of sins, that they acknowledge these sins, and are restored to fellowship).
 - 4) Obedience to God's Word is not legalism. Remember the definition. Everything you do has the potential for reward in heaven, under the right circumstances. The key is being in fellowship, and growing by grace and the Word of God.
 - 5) The legalist thinks that the good works he does for God will not only keep him in fellowship and walking with the Lord but will also make him more spiritual and a great Christian. This is confusing means and results.
10. Related principles: God's plan is a grace plan. God the Father does the work, man receives the benefit. God receives the glory for His own works; man receives no glorification.

- 1) Satan is the father of religion and legalism, which the primary means by which he "blinds the minds of those who seek Christ" and which are included in Eph. 4:14 as part of "...every wind of doctrine, sleight of men, cunning craftiness, by which they lie in wait to deceive." The employment of religion and legalism by Satan is designed to disrupt the plan of God and blind people to God's grace principles.
 - 2) *Religion* is used here in the sense of man doing something which earns the favor of God. In a general sense, Christianity could be viewed as a religion. However, strictly speaking, Christianity is a relationship to God through Christ, and not a religion. All religions are legalistic, and base our relationship to God upon some form of personal merit. So the strict definition of religion is, any system by which man with his own efforts tries to earn the approval of God.
 - 3) [Religious] legalism is a religious system that teaches that a person can do something to earn or merit salvation, favor and/or blessing from God.
11. Satan attacks principally in two ways: he attacks the unbeliever, to lead him away from the gospel of Jesus Christ; and he attacks the believer to compromise his Christian life (e.g., to steer him toward legalism rather than grace when it comes to living the Christian life).
 12. Most of the legalism found in the New Testament was related to the Judaizers; Christian Jews who (mostly) believed in Jesus Christ, but then taught that the spiritual life is adherence to the Mosaic Law and/or to other Jewish traditions. We find this in Acts 21–23, which includes Paul's misguided attempt to try to find common ground, or to try to make some accommodation to these legalists.
 - 1) In Acts 21 those "zealous for the law" were legalists. The law of Moses was their code of religious regulations and taboos; they were upset with Paul that he did not place high priority on living by the law.
 - 2) The entire context of Acts 21–23 demonstrates that Paul was unable to persuade Jews that Christ alone was sufficient for salvation and that the Christian life was lived by God's grace through the power of the Holy Spirit and by faith.
 13. It is possible that two Christians can exhibit nearly the exact same behavior, and one is living the Christian life and the other is not. The one living the Christian life is clearing the decks for spiritual service by naming his sins to God and learning Bible doctrine. Someone else might just live a very moral life, and go to church regularly. However, if the latter person does not periodically name his sins to God, then he is living a life of legalism. You cannot live the Christian life if you are not in fellowship, no matter how you appear on the outside.
 14. Legalistic people:
 - 1) Legalistic people often attempt to force their lifestyle upon others and thereby judge and interfere in the freedom of other believers (John 7.19–24 Romans 14.1–12 Galatians 2.1–5).
 - 2) Pride, self righteousness, and a critical mental attitude characterize legalists and perpetuate legalism (Matthew 12.10; Luke 18.9–12; Galatians 2.3–5; 6.12–13).
 - 3) The legalistic person has separated himself from the light load and easy yoke of freedom in Christ (Matthew 11.30; Galatians 5.1–4).
 - 4) Legalistic people replace Bible doctrine and the spirit of Bible doctrine with human standards (Matthew 12.1–8; 15.1–3).
 15. Common legalistic practices in Bible times include:
 - 1) Observing religious ritual for the sake of ritual (Acts 15.5; Galatians 4.10–11; Col. 2.16).
 - 2) Observing special days, months, seasons, and years (Galatians 4.10–11; Col. 2.16–18).
 - 3) Circumcision (Galatians 2.3–5; 5.2–4).
 - 4) Taboo lists (Colossians 2.20–22).
 - 5) Hand washing before eating (Matthew 15.1–20).
 - 6) Special rules for the Sabbath (Matthew 12.1–5, 9–14).
 - 7) Self righteousness (Luke 18.9–14).

- 8) Depending on personal heritage, ability, and conformity to a regulatory system to please God (Philippians 3.4–6).
16. Legalism is found in much different forms today, but the principles are the same. Current day expressions of legalism related to salvation include believe plus promise to change one's life, believe plus make Christ Lord, believe plus join the church, believe plus give up habits such as smoking and drinking, believe plus an emotional experience, and believe plus participate in church sacraments.
17. Current day expressions of legalism related to the Christian way of life may include right activity done for the wrong reasons: praying regularly, giving money, reading the Bible, and experiencing emotional highs during a church service.
18. Legalism related to the Christian life may also include wrong activity for the wrong reasons: imitating famous Christians (or the pastor or the pastor's wife¹), basing one's spiritual life on emotional responses to God, avoiding certain taboos such as smoking, attending movies, or playing sports on Sunday (these taboos were once central to Christian legalism; but they are not found as much any more). Legalism ultimately emphasizes human works.
19. The Bible teaches that a believer is unable to contribute anything to God through his own human efforts. Grace emphasizes God's work and the believer's dependence upon God's work.
20. The book of Galatians is the fundamental book about legalism:
- 1) Legalism is a result of a process of turning away from the truth. It is therefore deliberate (volitional). People deliberately choose legalism.
 - 2) The type of legalism which a person follows is often related to some kind of background exposure, practice, or principle. A person's culture and upbringing will determine what type of religion he follows. Galatians deals with religious legalism which came out of Jewish law and practice.
 - 3) Legalism always has a pseudo doctrine, called "another gospel of a different kind" in Gal. 1:6.
 - 4) Once legalism begins to operate in a believer's life, he becomes suspicious of another person's motives, methods, and message. Gal. 1:10–12.
 - 5) A mature Christian who has been in a legalistic religion generally recognizes legalism. Paul was at the top of Judaism before his conversion to the gospel of grace. Gal. 1:13–4
 - 6) Legalism sometimes uses techniques of infiltration, or spying, to gather information, while operating under a cloak of respectability. The legalist will bide his time until it suits his purpose to act. Gal. 2:1–4.



Graphic from:

<http://dailythoughts.ca/Images/Galatians/Galatians%202-20-21%20copy.jpg>

¹ I will forever remember attending a church where many of the women had the same inflection of speech as the pastor's wife; even as a believer who knew nearly nothing back then, I knew that was not the Christian way of life.

- 7) When legalists are met with truth, in terms of content and procedure, it crumbles and is unable to fulfill its objectives. The accurate teaching of grace keeps legalists from getting their campaigns launched. Gal. 2:5–9.
- 8) The term "bondage" in Gal. 5:1 means "the slavery to the principles and ways of regular human living." This is not the idea of degraded lasciviousness or debauchery. The Law was bonafide; circumcision was bonafide. But these things were distorted by legalists so that they became the master of the person instead of offering him a grace perspective.
- 9) When legalists lose a battle on one front, they will regroup and form another base of operations on another front. When legalists cannot get a grasp on a person when he is in the company of strong believers, they will concentrate on him when he is standing alone.
- 10) Legalism is often seen in leadership before it is seen in the congregation. When a leader gets involved in legalism, he influences others to go with him. This happens often when a project is going sour and the leader is desperate for support. One example would be, when there is financial trouble, there is a great temptation to get away from principles of grace giving.
- 11) The content of legalism is often something that has a bonafide function in some other context. In the Galatian churches, legalism was a distortion of the Law. The Law has a real and bonafide function, "to bring us to Christ." However, the legalism distorted it. Another example of legalism is taking the doctrine of separation and making it into some form of spirituality.
- 12) The legalistic person has been "bewitched." This term means "to have evil brought upon you by vain praise." Legalism appeals to a person's lust for approbation and tries to drag him into legalism to satisfy it. Gal. 3:1–3
- 13) The person in legalism is described as "foolish", meaning "not understanding." Legalism robs the believer of his benefits. It also robs people of their understanding of the Word of God and all of the benefits of the Grace life.
- 14) The legalist does not learn from experience. He has great tenacity; and despite many failures and vain strivings, he still can't see his error. He sees that his programs not working, so he has to go from one thing to the next, always looking for something better, never satisfied, and never satisfying others. Gal. 3:4
- 15) The very thing that the legalist puts himself under is that which rises up to strike him down. When a Christian puts himself under the taboos of others, he can't measure up. So he puts himself under a church organization, and he still can't measure up. The very system that he embraces proves him to be deficient by always presenting a moving target. Grace is the only system which does not magnify the believer's deficiencies.
- 16) The Galatian believers came under the influence of Judaistic legalism from those who taught the necessity of circumcision.
- 17) Such believers took themselves out from under grace principles and put themselves under the Law.
- 18) They soon adopted a practice of observing the days, months, times, and years.
- 19) This influenced their appreciation of their teacher and turned the Apostle Paul into an "enemy."
- 20) Their growth process was stopped and Christ was not "formed in them", so they were not growing into maturity.
- 21) As a result of slowed growth and the absence of maturity, bonafide production (by means of the filling of the Holy Spirit) was curtailed, and their only production was a false production expressed as lusts of the flesh.
- 22) The legalists strove for personal glory in Gal. 5:26.
- 23) They often resorted to straightening everyone else out. Gal. 6:1
- 24) They confused personal weariness with actual doctrinal spiritual production. Gal. 6:2–6
- 25) They attempted to impress peers, subordinates, or superiors. Gal. 6:11–13

- 26) Their approach resulted in man getting the glory, while God is left out, which is the antithesis of Grace. Gal. 6:14,15
21. Illustrations from Rom. 14, where the weaker brother is the legalist:
- 1) Romans 14 has a splendid description of the characteristics of a legalistic person who is called the "weaker brother." This is a great passage about how to think grace toward someone who does something obnoxious or "unspiritual". Remember that we all have areas of weakness. You may be the stronger believer in some of your areas of strength, and a weaker brother in areas of weakness. The idea in both cases is to avoid legalism and judging.
 - 2) The strong believer in Romans 14 is mature, oriented to grace and to the plan of God; he is occupied with Christ, and he operates in fellowship most of the time under the power of the Holy Spirit.
 - 3) The weaker brother is disoriented to grace, especially in the area of spirituality, and practices one or more forms of legalism. He is not comfortable unless he is judging the stronger believer in some grey area of behavior. The weaker brother has one or more of the following characteristics:
 - (1) The weaker brother is strong on scruples but not well informed about doctrine or divine viewpoint.
 - (2) The weaker brother operations on criteria of feelings, emotions, traditions, experiences, background, instead of Bible truth.
 - (3) The weaker brother operates in the energy of the flesh, producing human good (wood, hay, stubble) which he thinks is divine good (gold, silver, precious stones).
 - (4) The weaker brother is proud and critical of the strong believer, always judging him.
 - (5) The weaker brother sticks his nose into the affairs of others by gossiping, maligning, and judging.
 - (6) The weaker brother likes to set up a mold and try to squeeze everyone into it, so he is a bully.
 - (7) The weaker brother has a guilt complex, so he is emotionally unstable; he is sensitive and demands attention; he is full of self-pity and lusts for approbation in his sin nature.
 - (8) The weaker brother is jealous of others and tries to discredit them; he nitpicks and condemns the activities and projects of others.
 - (9) Note: the weaker brother is weak because he resists Grace doctrines. He can recover quickly by confessing sin, being controlled by the Holy Spirit, and pursuing a program of intake of Bible truth which will make him spiritually strong.

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This comes from the **Doctrine of Legalism** ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#)) ([WPD](#)). However, originally, that material comes primarily from the sources listed below.

The Abbreviated Doctrine of Legalism

1. Fundamental to understanding legalism, is to understand the concept of *grace*. Grace is all that God is free to do for mankind because of the work that has been done on our behalf by the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross. Grace means that man has received from God that which he has not earned or deserved. Nothing that we are, and nothing that we can do, is enough to qualify us for anything that the Lord has to give us. In fact, our human works are a matter of arrogance, which God will not tolerate. Isa. 64:6 describes how God views our works: [All our](#)

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righteousnesses are as filthy [lit., *menstruous*] rags in His sight.

2. The concept of legalism:
 - 1) Legalism is the belief that you can do something meritorious and thereby be rewarded in some way by God for doing good works or following some religious system of customs, laws and/or rituals.
 - 2) *Legalism* connotes any system of merit, by which a person tries to please God, or to assist God, or to glorify God by means of his own human power.
 - 3) Religious legalism promotes a system of works as man's approach to God. Religious legalism is whatever system that teaches that a person can do something to earn or merit salvation or blessing from God.
 - 4) Religious legalism also refers to any system of religious bondage imposed on someone by another individual, or by an organization, that attempts to make that person a practitioner of legalism. Often, bullying tactics or ostracism are used to keep people in line.
 - 5) Legalism includes the concept that God will bless, help, and prosper the one living according to whatever legalistic standards have been established. These standards may be the application of the norms and standards of society, some subgroup of society (a particular church or denomination), or from a misinterpretation of the Bible (e.g., Sabbath-keeping in the Church Age).
 - 6) Therefore, legalism is the belief in and the practice of human religious regulations and taboos because one believes *that* is the way to please God, to become spiritual, and to live the Christian life. Legalistic people, because they work for God's blessing, often confuse cause and result, and thereby misunderstand grace.
3. There are four principal spiritual transactions in which human works are not acceptable to God: salvation, spirituality, spiritual growth (resulting in spiritual maturity), and eternal rewards. Very briefly, legalism is against salvation by grace (Gal. 1:6–9 2:16), spirituality by grace (Gal. 3:2–5 5:5), and the freedom to live the Christian way of life by grace—which is the freedom to live apart from pressure imposed by a religious community or a taboo list (Gal. 4:8–11 5:1–5).
4. As an aside, Satan has two overall strategies with regards to people on this earth: (1) to keep them from the gospel; and (2) for those who have believed in Jesus Christ, to neutralize their spiritual lives. Huge numbers of believers have had their spiritual lives neutralized by legalism (which means, nearly nothing of what they do on this earth has any eternal consequence). Legalism is used by Satan to accomplish both of these objectives.
5. Legalism and salvation:
 - 1) Legalism in salvation is the concept that you must do something more than have faith in Christ in order to gain God's approval (or you must do something other than or in addition to exercising faith in Christ). That is, even in some legalistic Christian faiths, there is the belief that there is a set of additional works that must be done or that there is some often poorly-defined set of minimal standards which must be adhered to in one's life. If you do not meet those standards, then you did not really believe in the first place; or you had a head belief, but not a heart belief. Let me emphasize that this is a false view of salvation.
 - 2) There are many religious systems which teach salvation by works, or which try to mix works with faith, such as:
 - (1) Believe + keep the Law of Moses.
 - (2) Believe + be circumcised.
 - (3) Believe + water baptism.
 - (4) Believe + confess your sins.
 - (5) Believe + give up your bad habits and fully surrender; make Jesus Lord of all.

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- (6) Believe + make a public display or some sort (come forward or raise your hand); or have great sorrow or a show of tears.
 - (7) Believe + join a church.
 - (8) Believe + live some minimal sort of Christian life. This is what is found most often in today's Christianity. Those who promote this sort of legalism will never state it in this way, but they will carefully explain, "If you still do thus-and-so, maybe you did not really believe in Jesus in the first place." Or, "Maybe you have a head belief but not a heart belief." If there is no evidence of salvation, then, perhaps you were never really saved. "After all," they will tell you, "**If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature;**" (not understanding what they have just said). This is the most insidious attack upon salvation. The believer who is under attack for not acting like a Christian then has two ways to go: he can abandon his faith altogether because he did not have enough faith or he can enter into a life of legalism, adhering to whatever set of standards that quasi-Christian group has established.
 - (9) What is added to faith is just a matter of the time and place; Christian converts in Paul's day were told they needed to believe and be circumcised; it is unlikely that any significant group of legalists today adds circumcision to faith in Christ.
 - (10) However, the gospel of Jesus Christ is to have faith alone in Christ alone; it is believe + nothing. Placing your faith in Jesus Christ is a non-meritorious choice; and that is our only means to connect with God. We have no other means by which we can initially establish a relationship with God. Jesus said to Thomas, "**I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by Me.**" (John 14:6). **God saved you through faith as an act of kindness. You had nothing to do with it. Being saved is a gift from God. It's not the result of anything you've done, so no one can brag about it (Eph. 2:8–9; God's Word™).**
- 3) Legalism is diametrically opposed to salvation by grace. Gal. 1:6-9 **I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him Who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to the one we [originally] proclaimed to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is proclaiming to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (WEB, slightly modified). Gal. 2:16 Still we know that a person is not justified [i.e., made right with God] by [perfect obedience to] the law of Moses, but rather through faith in [the person and work of] Christ. [Knowing this] we have trusted in Christ Jesus [to save us], so that we might be made right with God by trusting in Him and not by [our compliance with] the requirements of the law of Moses. Because by such law-compliance no one can be made right with God. (AUV–NT)**
 - 4) Rom. 4:4–5 **Now wages are not considered a gift if the person has to work for them, but [rather] an obligation [of his employer]. But to the person who believes in God, who makes ungodly people right with Himself apart from doing good deeds, that person's faith is considered by God [as the basis] for being righteous. (AUV–NT) Or, to state this in a different way, how can salvation be the *gift of God* if you have to work for it?**
 - 5) Legalism becomes a heavy yoke or load to live under. No man has the ability to impress, bribe, coerce, or trick God into giving him salvation. The attempt to work for your salvation is taking on an impossible burden. In Matt. 11:28–30, [Jesus said], "**Come to Me, all of you who are overworked and overburdened and I will give you rest [i.e., spiritual refreshment].**"

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Accept My reins [on your life], and learn about Me, because I am gentle and humble, and [in My service] you will experience rest in your spirits. For My reins [on your life] are easy [to respond to] and the burden I place [on you] is light.” (AUV–NT; pronouns referring to Jesus are capitalized)

6. Legalism and fellowship with God:

- 1) Grace is the means by which our fellowship with God is restored. We name our sins to God and God forgives us these sins. 1Cor. 11:31 1John 1:9
- 2) We are forgiven, not because we feel badly, we do penance, we promise never to commit that sin again; we are forgiven because Jesus Christ died for that sin on the cross. The means by which our fellowship is restored is based upon grace, and not upon legalism. Again, all we do is admit our sins.
- 3) This naming of our sins both restores our fellowship with God and resumes the filling ministry of the Holy Spirit. Being led by the Spirit is not a 50-50 proposition; we are either led by the Spirit or we are not. 1John 3
- 4) Legalism in the Christian life is using some meritorious system in order to get back into fellowship (into God’s good graces, so to speak). This could include penance, begging for forgiveness, promising never to commit a particular sin again, promising God an overall improvement in your life, working up a deep sorrow over your sins, confessing your sins to a priest, doing penance, etc.
- 5) Some adherence to certain norms and standards are not wrong—such as functioning under the laws of divine establishment, which is a divine code designed for all people in all nations. Adhering to the laws of divine establishment make you a better person socially, and this adherence makes for a better nation, but it does not make you spiritual. You can be a good person in society, and yet not filled with the Holy Spirit.

7. Legalism and the Christian life:

- 1) After salvation, legalism is abandoning grace as the basis of our spiritual lives.
- 2) If we are saved by grace, then it is logical that spirituality and spiritual growth are also by grace. Gal. 3.2–5 **Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?** (ESV, mostly) Gal. 5:1 **For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.** (ESV)
- 3) As believers in Jesus Christ, we have the freedom to live the Christian way of life by grace—which includes the freedom to live apart from pressure imposed by a religious community or a list of taboos. Gal. 4.8–11 **Previously, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and empty elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once again? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. See also Gal. 5.1–6.**
- 4) Some forms of legalism are easy to define; e.g, Legalism is the belief in and the practice of human religious regulations and taboos because one believes that is the way to please God, become spiritual, and live the Christian life. This could include tithing, going to church, and not doing the things which some sub-group of Christians tell you not to do (don’t misunderstand this to mean that the Christian can do anything).
- 5) Legalism is a set of do’s or don’t’s, adherence to which mean that a person is spiritual or

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a good Christian. Here is the problem: with a list of do's and don't's, quite obviously, Charley might be better than Lucy who might be better than Linus when it comes to adherence to this list. However, in the Christian life, there is no such thing as a 50 percenter. You are saved or you are not; you are spiritual or you are not. Now, there are different stages of growth, but this is completely different from imperfectly following a list of do's and don't's.

8. Legalism versus grace apparatus for perception:

- 1) Grace apparatus for perception is terminology developed by R. B. Thieme, Jr., which means that all believers have the same ability to grow through knowledge of Bible doctrine and the same ability to be productive in the plan of God, no matter what their mental or physical deficiencies. If a person is able to understand the gospel and to believe in Jesus Christ, then he is able to execute the Christian way of life as a mature believer. We all reach spiritual maturity in the same way: God's grace system, which is the ability to understand with all the saints what the will of God is. Eph. 3:18–19
- 2) Every believer has the same crack at the Christian way of life—including Christian maturity—whether they have an IQ of 70 or of 130.
- 3) The full doctrine of the grace apparatus for perception is found [here](#) and [here](#).
- 4) Examples of legalism in the Christian Life, which are also examples of pseudo-spirituality and the pseudo Christian life. These are things that Christian churches, groups and believers do, instead of actually growing in grace and the knowledge of God's Word.
 - (1) Taboos: thinking one is spiritual because he doesn't do certain things or follows a certain do's and don't's. I don't know that this is really much of a part of mainstream Christianity as it used to be.
 - (2) Imitating Personalities: the idea that living the Christian life is conformity in dress, mannerisms, speech, etc. I have observed this, and it is quite entertaining, but unrelated to the spiritual life. This can occur in all kinds of churches. How many Sunday School teachers at Berachah Church attempted to imitate Bob's personality when teaching young children?
 - (3) Relative Righteousness: "your sins are worse than mine, therefore I am more spiritual" or "I am spiritual and you are carnal." Spiritually is an absolute state—you are or you are not.
 - (4) Ecstatics: spirituality by speaking in tongues, groaning, getting in a trance, fainting. This is a very big deal today (primarily the speaking in tongues and the trance-like states) and has been a corruption of the Christian life for over a century now.
 - (5) Asceticism: spirituality by self-sacrifice or extreme self-denial; giving up normal activities or even necessities in the mistaken notion that God is impressed. This is not generally found in the U.S. anymore, where we tend to be very self-indulgent; but is more common outside of the U.S. This is a very big deal in monasteries.
 - (6) Ritualism: This is the idea that one is spiritual or growing because he goes through various forms of ceremony or ritual. Spiritual maturity is ascribed to those who do this and look really holy while doing it. In the Apostle's day, the Jews promoted circumcision as necessary to the Christian walk. These days, any sort of ritual may be used, including singing (I am not saying that singing is wrong, but it is mostly unrelated to spiritual growth, unless one concentrates on the words and the words are Biblically accurate).
 - (7) These examples often take the place of spiritual growth. That is, instead of being filled with the Spirit and learning Bible doctrine and growing, one or more of these

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other things are offered up instead.

- (8) This describes most churches today. They practice various forms of legalism, rather than the filling of the Holy Spirit (by naming one's sins to God—1John 1:9) and **growing in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ** (2Peter 3:18).

9. Legalism and false systems of production:

- 1) One of the biggest problems of legalism is, confusing means with results. Legalism posits the idea that you are spiritual if you are faithful in praying, giving, witnessing, attending church, and so forth. But these legitimate activities are a result of Christian growth and the filling of the Holy Spirit. When the emphasis is placed upon doing these things, that is putting the cart before the horse. These things are not the means for spirituality or growth in Christ.
- 2) The grace principle is this: when you are in fellowship, occupied with Christ, and controlled by the Holy Spirit, all of your activities bring eternal reward (gold, silver, precious stones—1Cor. 3:10–14). You are producing divine good, and the spiritual power for your efforts comes from God as a grace provision. The amount that you produce is, of course, limited or enhanced by your spiritual growth.
- 3) When you are out of fellowship (with unconfessed sin), you are occupied with yourself, you control yourself, everything is chaos. You therefore produce human good (wood, hay, and stubble—1Cor. 3:10–14). There is no spiritual power supporting your efforts, and there is no reward for them in heaven. This describes most believers today. Most believers today spend a majority of their time out of fellowship, and they only get back into fellowship by accident (they shock themselves so much with a series of sins, that they acknowledge these sins, and are restored to fellowship).
- 4) Obedience to God's Word is not legalism. Remember the definition. Everything you do has the potential for reward in heaven, under the right circumstances. The key is being in fellowship, and growing by grace and the Word of God.
- 5) The legalist thinks that the good works he does for God will not only keep him in fellowship and walking with the Lord but will also make him more spiritual and a great Christian. This is confusing means and results.

Much of this was originally taken from the following websites:

<http://www.realttime.net/~wdoud/topics/legalism.html>

http://gracebiblechurchwichita.org/?page_id=260

<http://www.spokanebiblechurch.com/study/Bible%20Doctrines/dictionary-bible-doctrine.htm>

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These doctrines ultimately come from the desk of the late R. B. Thieme, Jr. There are certainly additions and editing which has taken place over the years.

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