

A Brief Introduction to Legalism

Breaking the Bonds of Legalism

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Thank you so much for being with us here today. I'm very excited about this series that we're starting, kind of laid the foundation for it last week, and what we're going to be looking at over the next three or four weeks. I've titled today's message "A Brief Introduction to Legalism," and we may go directions that you're not expecting with a topic like that, but the reality of what we're going to be studying over the next month or so, we're kind of in between our normal book, verse by verse book studies as we just finished the Sermon on the Mount, the reality of what we're going to study here in the next few weeks is something that has the potential to profoundly change your life and perhaps may even give you insight into ways of thinking that you haven't even recognized perhaps in your Christian life, making an assumption about the conversion of most of you in here. And last week we set a foundation for that when we considered five Gospel words of hope or five words of Gospel hope, and what we reminded ourselves of was very familiar truth and yet things that are easy to overlook, to not really think through all of the implications of what they mean. We said that while we were sinners, Romans 5, while we were sinners, God saved us in Christ Jesus and we looked at a number of different texts that explained the motivation of God in saving us, the attributes of God that activated his heart to save sinners like you and me, and the sequence of God's saving work is so crucial for us to understand and to grasp deeply and to anchor it into our hearts. This is the cornerstone, you could say, of sanctification. This is the cornerstone of proper spiritual growth, to grasp this, the cornerstone being that stone which sets the direction of all of the lines of the remainder of the building. Proper structure, proper lines are set by the cornerstone. If the cornerstone is off-kilter, the whole building is distorted, so also in the Christian life, these considerations are fundamental to your future sanctification and the kind of person you become in Christ.

While we were sinners, God saved us in Christ Jesus. God did not save you because you were somehow righteous. God did not save you because you had done some things to gain his attention. You did not meet a minimal standard of righteousness and then Christ died for you, you didn't attain to a certain level of goodness and then God responded to you. That's not the way the Bible describes salvation at all. It is while we were yet sinners that Christ Jesus died for us. We had no merit. Oh, oh, beloved, you had no entitlement to the grace of God. You had nothing whatsoever about you that earned any kind of merit, any kind of reward from God at all. You were dead in your trespasses and sins. You were dominated by the prince of the power of the air. You were by nature a child of wrath,

alienated in your mind from a holy God. You were hostile to God. The Bible says that the mind of the flesh cannot please God, Romans 8.

Beloved, we stop, we pause, we consider to dwell on that very carefully because this sets the context for everything else in salvation, everything else in the nature of the Christian life. You did not deserve anything from God except his judgment. You were a guilty, lost sinner who was not seeking for him and Scripture tells us very plainly that no one comes to Christ unless the Father draws him, no one comes to Christ unless God in mercy works in his heart in order to draw him to Christ. That is foundational to everything else and when you understand that, then you are in a position to ask the question that we tried to answer a bit last week: why would God do that? Why would a holy and exalted God condescend to save an unworthy sinner and to bring him into his family? Scripture describes Christians in many different ways, one of the ways that it describes us is we are the children of God. Why would God, holy and just, bring an unworthy sinner like you and me into his family, into his kingdom? Well, Scripture tells us and describes it in what we looked at last week, that salvation was an act of the love of God; that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son; while we were sinners, Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. It's a display of the kindness of God. God shows kindness and provides useful goodness to people that are not worthy of it. It's a display of the mercy of God, that he had compassion on us in our need and he met that, though we had no right to it. It was a display of grace, by grace you are saved. Undeserved favor from this God. And it was a display of patience. He willingly overlooked your life of sin, as it were, he bided his time until he would bring you into his kingdom, and in the meantime, overlooked the provocations of your sin against his holiness, patiently overlooking them for the sake of the longer-term goal that he had to bring you into his family and his kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ. You did not deserve that. Salvation was a product of love from God, kindness from God, mercy, grace and patience from God. You must start there. You did not deserve that. You could not have deserved that. You never would deserve that. That is the starting point of what it means to be a true Christian.

We received favor from God even though we did not deserve it and, beloved, that provides the foundational context for this brief topical series on legalism that we are going to engage in, and what you will find, I believe what many of us will find, what I found in my own heart as I was going through these things and preparing them, is that there are strains, there are strands, there are streaks of legalism in our hearts that we may not realize, that we may not recognize. The likelihood is that you have lurking in the corners of your mind a legalistic concept of the way God should deal with you as a Christian, the way that he should deal with your life, that distorts the proper thinking that would really promote your sanctification, that would promote your growth in Christ, and that's what we want to address over the next few weeks, the next three or four weeks as time would have it.

What is legalism and why does it matter? We need to start with a definition here. Perhaps some of you new to biblical teaching, perhaps some of you new to Christ, those of you that are not in Christ, maybe this is a brand-new topic to you. If so, praise the Lord for that, that we're able to grow together in these different things. What is legalism and why

does it matter? I'm going to give you a definition that I borrow from another writer that I thought was helpful, and here it is: legalism is behavior motivated by the false notion that sinners can earn favor with God. That's only half the definition but I'll stop there and repeat it for those of you taking notes. "Legalism is behavior motivated by the false notion that sinners can earn favor with God either before or after salvation through legal means such as obedience, ritual or self-denial." I'll say it one more time. This is part of the cornerstone we're laying for this series. Legalism is behavior motivated by the false notion that sinners can earn favor with God either before or after salvation through legal means such as obedience, ritual or self-denial.

Now, let's break that down a little bit here just at the start. It's the idea, legalism is the idea that a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, can do things that will prompt God to give them favor; that they can earn favor; more specifically, that they merit, that they deserve. Here is the key word that we're going to keep coming back to again and again: that they are entitled to something from God because of what they have done in their life. Legalism is the idea that you are entitled to something from God because of something that you have done in your life. "Before salvation, you know, I was baptized and therefore I deserve salvation from God. I have earned salvation from God. I went through the rituals prescribed by my church." Or, and this is the prevailing mindset in the world, "I am just generally a pretty good person. I haven't killed anybody." You know the line, you know the story. "I'm a pretty good person. Oh, I'm not perfect," that false humility that people will trot out as soon as they say that, "I'm not perfect but I am pretty good and therefore, God, I deserve things from God. I believe God will grant me heaven when I die because I'm a pretty good person." That is legalism. It is the false notion that a sinner can earn favor with God; that he can earn it by what he does through his obedience, through church rituals, or self-denial, fastings and prayers and that kind of stuff.

In the broadest terms, beloved, we're laying things down in just such a very basic way, in the broadest way that we could describe this, legalism is a way of thinking and feeling about God. Legalism is a way of thinking about God, about the terms upon which God deals with us. What is the basis upon which God deals with sinners? How does God respond to sinners? Legalism is a way of thinking about that that says that what I do determines the way that God responds to me, and if, I mean, legalism holds out this promise of reward, you could say, if you keep the rules, God will deal with you in a certain way. If you do A, B and C, God will give you D, E and F, and there is a 1:1 correspondence between your external behavior and what God does for you either in providing you heaven or simply in giving you the kind of life that you want here on earth. "I do this, things go well for me. I break the rules, God comes down hard on me." Legalism is expressed in that general mindset. Now, most of us are a little more sophisticated in our thinking and a little more sophisticated and nuanced in our thinking about things than just that, but when you strip it all away, when you strip away the different layers of paint that have been painted on your soul over time, you come down and you strip it down and you get down to the bare wall, a lot of us are thinking that way, "I have been good, therefore I get a good life in response," and that is a legalistic mindset. It is a legalistic way of thinking.

Now before I go any further, I want to circle back. We cannot circle back to what we said last week often enough. If you were not here last week, I beg you to pick up a CD on the way out, look up the message online, it's easily available, because this is foundational to everything else. Beloved, if you are a Christian, God has not dealt with you in a legalistic way, has he? Has he? You must answer that question in your heart and understand it and embrace it as the fundamental disposition upon which you think about God. God has not dealt with you in a legalistic way. God has not dealt with you in a tit-for-tat way. God dealt with you according to undeserved love, undeserved kindness, undeserved mercy, by definition undeserved grace, God dealt with you patiently to bring you to Christ and it was all counter to your merit; it was all counter to your deserving. It was not what you deserved. It was rather goodness poured out upon you despite your undeserving, despite your lack of merit. That is foundational to everything else in ways that we're going to see over the next two and three weeks. Today we just want to briefly introduce the concept of legalism, look at some Scriptures to help us frame our thinking rightly. Today we're kind of plowing the ground for the seeds that we'll sow and the fruit that we will harvest over the next two or three weeks.

I want to talk about legalism from two perspectives: legalism before salvation, legalism after salvation. So first of all, let's consider legalism before salvation. By the way, we're not promoting legalism in what we're same here. We are explaining it and refuting it, alright? So we're not trying to encourage people to become legalists here, we're explaining, exposing the dangers so that we could understand it, we could biblically assess it, and that we could begin to grow even more in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

What would legalism before salvation look like? Well, there is an approach to legalism, one type of legalism is related to how a person even receives salvation at all. This kind of legalism would require a sinner to perform some work or some ceremony or some series of works or some kind of lifestyle – keyword here – before he can receive forgiveness of his sins, before he can be justified by God. You must do these things in order to be saved, if you do not do them, you cannot be saved, and until you do them, you cannot be saved. So the promise of forgiveness in this mindset is very elusive. It is a mirage in the desert that you go to but you never quite reach. The promise that you would do certain works or follow certain rules of your church, baptism and confirmation and all kinds of different things like that, and then we'll talk about whether God will forgive you or not. That's the idea. The legalist believes that he can earn merit with God by doing the right things, keeping the right rules, and Scripture knows nothing about that. Scripture is clear.

Turn to Galatians 5, if you will. In the letter to the Galatians, Galatians 5, the Apostle Paul was dealing with an influence of certain Jewish teachers who were confusing the matter of salvation. They were teaching Gentiles that they could not be saved unless they received the rite of circumcision according to Jewish law, and Paul is writing to refute this notion. He says in chapter 5, verse 2, Galatians 5:2, he says,

2 Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.

The idea that you would receive circumcision motivated by the belief that this was necessary to salvation and without it you cannot be saved, a means of earning your own righteousness before God by keeping the rule. Paul says in verse 3,

3 And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. 4 You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

He says with this legalistic mindset, that there are things that you can do in order to be saved, there are things that you must do in order to be saved, he says you have cut yourself off from Christ himself because – here's the thing, beloved; we're going to do this, we're going to go slowly here – Christ is not offered to you on terms of obedience, Christ is offered to you on terms of faith. Christ is not offered to you as an inducement to get certain behavior out of you and then you receive salvation, Christ is offered to you on the premise of faith, on the condition of faith alone; that you can believe in Christ now and be saved. If you try to go another route to find a right standing with God, you have severed yourself from Christ, you have cut yourself off from Christ. They were severed from Christ because, beloved, they added a human work as a precondition to receiving forgiveness from God. There must be this human work before there can be forgiveness.

Paul earlier in Galatians had emphatically repudiated that idea. He had emphatically repudiated that idea. Look at verse 16 where he says, chapter 2, verse 16, where he says in three positive and in three negative ways, he's saying this up one side and down the other, you could say, verse 16,

16 nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law [negative statement] but [positive statement] through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.

Take a moment to look at that again and see the three positives and the three negatives. Negative number 1 at the beginning of the verse: "a man is not justified by the works of the Law." Okay? Nothing could be plainer than that. Justification, a legal declaration from God that the man has satisfied all the requirements of God's law, of God's holiness, and that he is declared fit for the kingdom of God, that there is a perfect standing. He is not condemned by the law of God, rather God judges him as having completely satisfied it. I realize for some of us, for me too, you know, it takes time. We speak slowly. We don't hurry so that these things can set in. A man is not justified by the works of the law, negative 1, and then he follows with three positive assertions about how justification is received: "but through faith in Christ Jesus," number 1: "even," number 2, "we have believed in Christ Jesus"; "so that," positive 3, "we may be justified by faith in Christ." Do you see it? Faith in Christ Jesus. Believed in Christ Jesus. Faith in Christ. That is the way that forgiveness is received. That is the way that a man is justified, not by what he

does but through faith in Christ, and then to make this as clear and emphatic as possible, he adds the two negatives at the end of the verse: "not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified." This is in perfect keeping with Paul's teaching elsewhere. Romans 3, "There is no one righteous, not even one. There is none who does good. There is none who seeks for God. There is not even one."

Look over at Ephesians, the next book over from Galatians, and this is such a critical point and it is so easy to go astray that the Bible goes to great lengths to emphasize the point repeatedly. The repetition is necessary and shows us, beloved, how vulnerable we are to think wrongly about this most crucial issue. So it says it repeatedly, positively and negatively, so that we won't miss the point. Paul does the same thing in Ephesians 2:8,

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith [positive statement there]; by grace you have been saved through faith [here comes the negative] not of yourselves, [positive statement] it is the gift of God; 9 [negative statement] not as a result of works

By grace through faith in Christ, not by works, not by what you do. It is a gift instead.

Beloved, you must understand, you must embrace, you must let it go very very deeply into your fundamental assumptions about God and existence, that if you are a Christian, it is not because you deserved that, it is because God has given favor to you contrary to what you did deserve. He has given grace to you as a gift and Christ was received by faith, not something that was earned by anything in your life. That is fundamental. Beloved, there is no spiritual merit before God in anything that you and I do. There is nothing, if you are a Christian, there is nothing that you did that made God show favor to you in contradistinction to someone else who did not do what you did. That is not the basis on which God saved us. He saved us in Christ. He saved us according to his love, grace, mercy, kindness and patience, not according to something meritorious, something worthy that was found in you or was found in me, or in anything that you did. There is nothing like that.

Turn over to the book of Titus 3 which is just two or three or four letters beyond Ephesians, for those of you that are still becoming more acquainted with your Bible. Titus 3. Paul sets the stage for repeating this emphasis when he says in verse 3, he points out our total lack of merit and deserving in verse 3 of Titus 3. He says,

3 ... we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.

Beloved, that is the condition of all men before salvation and look at that verse and realize that there is no merit in that verse anywhere. We were deceived. We were hateful. We were lustful. We were disobedient. There is no merit there anywhere in that verse.

Beloved, think about it this way: that verse describes our prior spiritual lives as an old sponge that has been sitting out in the sun for years and years and years, think of the desert sun, Death Valley, California, 120 degrees and in 0% humidity, any sense of moisture in that sponge has been completely sucked out. There is no moisture there at all. So in like manner, beloved, prior to coming to salvation, there was no merit to be squeezed out of your life. You could have squeezed and squeezed and squeezed everything about your soul and not one drop of merit, of deserving, would have been found there. Nothing would have come out. You were born into sin, you lived in sin, you were dead in trespasses and sin, no life, no merit whatsoever. Scripture lays this out completely and that humbles us. That silences us before God.

Well, how then were we saved if not by something that we deserved? Well, Paul goes on and repeats what we've been emphasizing for the past week and a half now. Verse 4, "But," by contrast, instead of by merit, despite your sin and undeserving, by contrast something different, a totally different realm,

4 But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, 5 He saved us,

And again, the negative and the positive. You must see this.

not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but [instead] according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Pretty plain, isn't it? Over and over and over again, there is no room for misunderstanding to the one who reads Scripture. God's way of salvation is to receive Christ through faith alone. We are justified, we are declared righteous by faith alone, in Christ alone. Nothing else.

So to rely on, in the Galatians' case, circumcision, keeping the law of Moses, to rely on your baptism as an infant, to rely on good behavior, to rely on – here's the real key, I mean, this is where most people live and think – to rely on an idea that there is a sliding scale that God looks at you and compares you to someone else and since you're better than someone else, because you are comparatively better externally to another man, God saves you on that basis. That is an utter lie from the deepest pit of hell. That is not true because the law of God, the righteousness of God, disqualifies us all. Matthew 5:48, "you are to be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect." It's not whether you are better than someone else, it's whether you're perfect like God. And you're not and therefore you can never be saved by that way. To rely on something in yourself, to claim some goodness, some good act in yourself before God, is to have a false hope.

Beloved, here's the key. This is a really critical sentence that I'm about to say here: good works are not the means by which God has appointed a man to be saved. It is not by good

behavior that any man can come to God. If you're a sinner here this morning, which you are whether you realize it or not, that's another thing, if you find yourself here burdened by a guilty conscience, knowing that you have violated the law of God, understand that there is nothing that you can do to escape from that condition. There isn't anything. You can't go someplace and do something that will make your guilt go away on your own. The promise of God of forgiveness is in Christ alone, received by faith alone, not through anything that you do. And beloved, here's the thing: the idea of being a religious person, faithful at a church, being generous with your gifts or whatever, that that would somehow work to save you, that might look good on the outside but, beloved, that will not save you, and to think that it will is to establish your own standard that God won't honor, that God does not recognize. The Jews stumbled on this very point.

Look at Romans 10. Paul in writing about his unsaved Jewish brothers, says in chapter 10, verse 1, he says,

1 Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation.

"They are not saved. I wish they were. I pray for God to do something about that but they are not saved." And he goes on and he describes something about them. He says in verse 2,

2 For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God [they are zealous for what they are doing; they think they are doing the right thing], but not in accordance with knowledge.

It's not true. It's not real. It's not what God recognizes. Verse 3,

3 For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.

You see, you don't get to make up your own approach to how you will be saved. You don't get to make up the standard and then live according to your own standard and expect God to honor that, for God to receive you, it does not work that way. Salvation belongs to God. Salvation is of the Lord. It is his salvation. It is his kingdom. It is his righteousness. It is his holiness. And that means that God establishes the standard. God establishes the means by which men will be saved or not and we must submit to the revealed righteousness, the revealed way of salvation of God if we want to be saved because there is not another entrance. We don't get to go to a back entrance and enter into the kingdom through another way. There is one way and that is through faith in Christ alone. Coming to him humbly. Receiving him alone. Trusting in his righteousness alone to save you.

Salvation is a gift from God not as a result of works. Legalism before salvation teaches in one form or another, "You do these things and then you can be saved." Scripture says, "No, it is not by works, it is by faith alone." So legalism before salvation does not and

cannot work. It's not real. It is simply a further confirmation in sin and guilt. Think about it. What is the person who asserts that he is good enough for heaven, what is he really doing? Well, there is this, here's the perspective from God on that: not only have you sinned in heart, word and deed, not only are you guilty of your actual sins, you compound those sins by another even greater sin, by asserting, believing a false Gospel. Trying to achieve salvation by a means that God has not ordained, that's lethal, that's very deadly. That's even more wicked. So salvation by works is simply a compounding of guilt. Legalism before salvation refuted from the Scriptures.

Now, secondly, let's talk about legalism after salvation. Here we're going to assume somebody that is genuinely born again, someone that has put their faith in Christ. Beloved, here's the thing, it may surprise you to hear me say this: you can affirm justification by faith alone in your mind, you can believe in Christ but still suffer in legalism, still suffer from a legalistic mindset not because you're trusting in your works to save you but because you have a perspective on the Christian life that is not in accordance with truth. You could ask questions like this: what is the mark of spiritual growth in a Christian? What role do good works play in the life of a believer? Can a man become more justified by doing good works? Is justification, true justification once received, is it threatened by your sin? And the answer to that question is no. Justification is not threatened once truly received by your sin in your life as a believer, because justification, go back to these fundamental cornerstones that we've been talking about, God never saved you on the basis of your works in the first place. In justification, God imputes to you the righteousness of Christ. He credits that fully to your account. You have a perfect righteousness based on the perfect obedience of Christ to the law and your obedience does not improve that righteousness and your occasional sins as a believer do not diminish that righteousness. The ground of your justification is found outside of your behavior. It's found by Christ and received by faith alone.

So those with a legalistic mindset see remaining sin in their lives and start to doubt whether they are still saved or not, "Has God changed his attitude toward me because of the sins in my life as a believer? Does God react and emotionally swing, I'm obedient and he's happy, I'm disobedient and he's angry with me? Does it swing back and forth like that?" Beloved, what I want you to see and I say this to help you, I say this, this is very liberating, the things that we're starting to open up here: that is not the basis upon which God saved you. Remember, beforehand you were lost and dead and guilty in sin and God saved you by love, grace, mercy, patience and kindness. Well, now that you are in Christ, his approach in dealing with you hasn't suddenly gone back to a rules-based means of existence. So we need to think differently about that. Once you come into Christ, salvation begins a process of change. Sanctification is the work of God in the life of a believer which brings him closer to the likeness of Christ in the believer's daily life, attitudes and conduct. Sanctification is a work of God in which the believer is brought closer to the likeness of Christ in his daily life, attitudes and conduct.

Now, how can you recognize legalism after salvation? What would that look like if somebody was going to be legalistic as a Christian, what would that look like? Well, it won't necessarily be, it wouldn't be in the doctrines that they affirm. "I affirm that

salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone," and their doctrine is correct on that grounds and they are trusting in Christ for their ultimate salvation. We can assume that. We can recognize that. We can take that as a given. But that doesn't exhaust the threat of legalism to the mind. You can approach the Christian life in a legalistic way that says something like this, that has an attitude that, "The presence of certain behaviors in my life will somehow make me more worthy in the eyes of God. Or perhaps the absence, avoiding certain behaviors can make me more favorable, more worthy in God's eyes than I otherwise might be." This is a legalism that establishes rules that have no basis in Scripture. "If I do A, B and C, I'm going to be more like what God wants me to be," and the key being that these are rules that are not found in Scripture.

Look at the Gospel of Mark 7 and we'll illustrate this. Some have called this legalism the legalism of the Pharisees, a legalism that though it would teach grace, it would live by a legalism that is inconsistent with grace. Chapter 7, verse 1 of Mark says,

1 The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, 2 and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; 4 and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.)

The Pharisees had this mindset that these are the rules that you are to keep in the religious life, and they see Jesus and his disciples not keeping the rules and so they challenge him. In verse 5,

5 The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?"

"Why aren't they doing the righteous thing that we have declared?" Well, Jesus rebukes them in verse 6,

6 And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. 7 But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' 8 Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men."

Beloved, one of the distinguishing features of legalism is that it pays attention to man-made rules that are not found in the Bible. It sets standards either for the person themselves or seeks, even worse, to bind the conscience of others by requiring certain behaviors in the Christian life – key phrase – not found in the word of God, not revealed in Scripture.

This legalism can be recognized by the impositions of duties on a Christian that have no biblical basis, and so someone given over to legalism may feel good about and consciously reflect on the fact that, "I don't smoke. I don't dance. I don't drink. I don't go to movies." You can debate whether those things are good or bad, whether they are helpful or unhelpful, but here's the thing, to look at that and say, "Because of that I stand in greater favor with God, because I conformed to this external standard of behavior I am in a better position with God," that's legalism. That's lethal and it is wrong because to think in that way, to say, "I am applying standards of my own to determine what godliness is like," that kind of legalism is wrong because it goes beyond Scripture because this is not what God has revealed on particulars like that.

Look at Deuteronomy 4. We see the preeminence of Scripture and the fact that God has not only revealed to us his word in the 66 books of the Bible, he has commanded us not to go beyond his word in what we bind the consciences of men with. In Deuteronomy 4:2 it says,

2 "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you."

Do not add to the word.

Deuteronomy 12:32, I'll just read it for the sake of time. It says,

32 "Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it."

Don't add to the word with your own made-up rules.

In 1 Corinthians 4:6, Paul says that we must,

6 ... learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.

Don't exceed what has been written. Don't add to it. Don't make up your own rules and think that by adding more than what God requires somehow puts you in a better position before him. Don't do that. If you have certain standards by which you live, great. Ask yourself: where are these grounded in the Bible or am I just perpetuating something that I heard from someone else that isn't found in Scripture? That's one aspect of it.

Secondly, perhaps even closer to home. Here is where I believe the gushing waters of pastoral help will be found in what we're going to talk about in the next two or three weeks, and this is going to be painful, maybe. Legalism, beloved, can be recognized also in the heart of one who expects better treatment from God due to his own personal performance. "I did this, God should do this." And it can be exposed in a thousand

different ways that you would not necessarily immediately attribute to a legalistic mindset, but when it is laid out before you, it's clear, and once it's clear, it can be corrected by those five words of Gospel hope.

Think with me here. Think with me here. "God isn't fair. What did I do to deserve these trials?" Woven into a statement like that is an assumption that I behave a particular way and I get a particular response from God. Woven into that is the fact that – watch it – that God is subject to a standard higher than himself; that he has to act according to a standard of fairness that even he is governed by. "God isn't fair." Well, the concept of fairness means that there is a standard that everyone has to abide by. "What did I do to deserve these trials? There is a standard that I have kept that should have exempted me from trials. I shouldn't have to go through this hardship." That's a legalistic mindset. "I did my part. I'm entitled to something in response. I was good. I played by the rules so I get what I want. I get the life I want. I get the spouse I want. I get the family I want. I get the job I want because I did what I was supposed to do." Beloved, there are a few things to say about that. That's not life, right? Once you get out of your twenties into your thirties, forties, life itself teaches you that lesson. That's not reality and, beloved, it's not the nature of grace either. Others perhaps experience this legalistic mindset in the fact that they fear condemnation from God because they can't keep all the rules. "I haven't read my Bible enough. I haven't prayed enough. God must be angry with me." Thinking that, the underlying premise of that being that God deals with me in a predictable pattern based on the rules that I keep, and if I don't keep the rules, God is going to judge me. Well, beloved, go back to those five words of Gospel hope. Did God deal with you like that when you were a sinner apart from Christ? Did he save you because you kept the rules? No. He saved you according to love, grace, mercy, kindness and patience. What makes you think that suddenly he flipped and now he's a legalistic God in dealing with you?

You see, those feelings and a thousand others like them, here's the thing, beloved, they expose a legalistic mind that is not fully grounded, fully mature in grace. Step back. Broad statement here: men are sinful and depraved. They cannot do anything to incline God to deal favorably with them. Beloved, I'm offering hope for your soul, hope for your beleaguered weary heart in everything that I'm saying here. God saved you in his love, kindness, mercy, grace and patience. Now that you are saved, do you know what he does? He keeps you in love, kindness, mercy, grace and patience. 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us all our sins and to cleanse us from every unrighteousness." The blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

You see, we have to take what we know to be true at the moment of our conversion, those five Gospel words of hope, and realize that that was the beginning of the pattern upon which God will always deal with us in Christ. Legalism perverts and obscures those words of hope and what it does is this, that mindset of which we have been speaking, that legalistic mindset, wraps its ugly roots around the way that we think about God, "God, this isn't fair. I don't deserve this. What are you doing?" I can remember a time 30 years ago, I was shaking my fist at God as a new believer, "How can you do this to me?" Well, there was legalism all wrapped up in that. "I did this, therefore I should get this," and

that's not the way it works. It wraps its roots around our thoughts about God, it wraps its roots around the way that we think about others. Quietly, insidiously we think that we are somehow better than someone else. If we are in a privileged position, we tend to look with contempt on others who are not. "I have a better position because my life was better," rather than attributing it to the free undeserved grace, love, mercy, patience and kindness of God that you enjoy a good life. And the way that we think about ourselves, it destroys joy, it destroys love, it destroys hope, it destroys peace, all in ways that we're going to see over the next two or three weeks.

Now beloved, here's the thing: it is not that many of you consciously think this way. It's not that you are consciously thinking $A+B=C$. It's not that you are consciously thinking, "I have been good and therefore God owes me." It's not that you are consciously thinking that way, the problem is that you and I operate on assumptions that we haven't considered, we operate on presuppositions that we haven't examined, and I would say, it takes some time to peel back the layers of the onion to get to the core of what prompts those thoughts. "God, this isn't fair. I deserve better than this. Why doesn't God give me what I want?" At the core, beloved, what I want you to see for today is at the core of that are legalistic assumptions that are governing your thinking, legalistic assumptions that have not been completely, fully, maturely informed by love, grace, mercy, kindness, patience.

We've only introduced the topic today. Where does legalism come from? Better stated, where did it come from? How do you recognize it? How can you more fully recognize it in your life? Those are the questions that we're going to consider in the next two three weeks. I hope you'll be with us.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you that you have not dealt with us according to what we deserve because what we deserve is judgment and wrath, and not one of us has received that from your hands. You have dealt with us in grace. You have been patient with us, and for those of us that are in Christ, you have given us in complete disproportion to anything that we deserved. We thank you for that. Now we pray that you would help us see the implications of that for our Christian living. Deliver us from the false doctrine of legalism, the false thinking of legalism, and deliver us into that realm where we live in conscious gratitude of abundant, free, loving grace poured out upon us that we might humbly depend upon you for every aspect of our lives, humbly receive hardship when it comes, and humbly give thanks when you bless us beyond all measure. Keep us from pride. Keep us from false guilt and let us walk in the light of the grace and mercy of our Savior Jesus Christ through whose name we gladly pray. Amen.

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