Grace Group Study Guide

Greater > Week 14

Colossians 2:16-19

*“Christians probably have tolerated no sin more than the sin of legalism. In fact, many Christians would probably be surprised to hear legalism labeled as sin. Legalists are viewed as being a bit overzealous, or perhaps as super-spiritual. But they aren’t thought of as sinning in the same sense as adulterers, thieves, and the like. To the contrary, legalism seems to promote holiness, a valid Christian concern.*

*Yet the Apostle Paul taught that legalism is an aggressive evil that those who have been saved by grace must strongly oppose. Most of his Epistle to the Galatians is an attack on legalism. Many of his other letters contain strong warnings about the dangers of legalism. In 1 Timothy 4:1-3, he states that certain men who forbade marriage and advocated abstaining from foods were promoting the doctrines of demons. Clearly, legalism was no minor sin in Paul’s mind!*

*So what is legalism? The heart of legalism is an attitude of pride. The legalist prides himself for keeping certain standards and judges others who do not keep those standards. The legalist thinks that he is made acceptable to God, either for salvation or spirituality, by his conformity to certain rules that he picks and chooses. Invariably, those rules are not things like loving the Lord with all your heart, or loving your neighbor as yourself. Rather, the legalist picks rules that he is able to keep and conveniently neglects or ignores the things he is not able to keep. The legalist often focuses on external conformity while neglecting the heart righteousness God requires (Matt. 23:23-28). Dr. Charles Ryrie (Balancing the Christian Life [Moody Press], p. 159) defines legalism as “a fleshly attitude which conforms to a code for the purpose of exalting self.”*

(Cole, Steven. “Reject Legalism, Hold to Christ.” Flagstaff Christian Fellowship)

We don’t need a visual show of hands to know that probably all of us at some time have either been subject to the demands of the legalist or played the part of the legalist. What a vicious cycle to be engaged in. Feelings of holiness and spiritual self-worth because of all that you are doing for God, and at the same time, burning the candle at both ends- physically and mentally burning yourself out trying to meet all of the self-imposed requirements for worthiness.

I do feel like I need to clarify though that there is a VERY big difference between obedience to the things that the Lord has called us to do and man-made rules that make us feel good about ourselves, while trapping us in the previously mentioned cycle of slavery.

**Discuss: How can we discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7) and yet avoid legalism?**

A second problem that is addressed as we consider this outward works-based spirituality is that people can follow all the ins and outs of the man-made requirements and have no concept of a relationship with Christ. Even worse is the fact that many believers will never question where another’s heart is, because they are “doing so much for the Lord,” and are “so spiritual,” that they have to be saved! Easter Sunday, we looked at a couple passages from Matthew 23 where Jesus calls out the Pharisees for what they really were – clean on the outside and dead on the inside. What a revelation that must have been to the Gentile – these people who look on the outside to be SO spiritual are in reality, spiritually dead.

Paul lays down the qualifications for elders in Titus 1, and in doing that he *says “**For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision,****11****who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain.”* Notice that Paul is talking about those “of the circumcision.” He’s not talking about it in the sense that we saw a few weeks ago, rather he’s talking about the Jew who views circumcision as necessary to be right before God. I point that out because he’s speaking specifically about people who on the outside appear to be righteous but as he writes, on the inside they are “rebellious, empty talkers and deceivers.”

Just a few verses later Paul concludes by saying *“****16****they profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.”*

What is the point? The point is that we can’t judge a person’s heart based on the fact that they do or don’t attend church three times a week, read theirBible, serve in the community, drink wine or anything else that we deem appropriate or inappropriate. Our works and personal accomplishments, no matter how impressive, will not get us into the kingdom of Heaven – it is only by the finished work of Christ. With that in mind, Paul gives us an avenue for avoiding the spirit of legalism: hold fast to the head. Who is the head? **Christ.**

**Discuss: How have you experienced the trap of legalism? Why do you think so many Christians tolerate it and even treat it as a virtue rather than a stumbling block?**

**Legalists will often say, “Well, we have to have rules, otherwise people will live any way they want.” Read Titus 2:11-12 and 2 Peter 1:2-3, and discuss why this reasoning is untrue.**

*“When we come before God, it would be well if we would always remember this. We are committing great folly if, when we are spreading our case before him, we dare for one moment to speak of ourselves as good or excellent. We shall never succeed in that way; he will not listen to us, for this plan has no power with him; but if, when we come to him, we can plead our sin and our misery, then shall we prevail. Nay, we may even go the length of the psalmist, David, when he prayed, “For thy name’s sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity;”—and for a strange reason, you would say,—”for it is great.”*

*He used the greatness of his sin as an argument why God should have mercy on him!*

*O ye legalists, who are looking to yourselves for some arguments with which to prevail with God; O ye who look to your sacraments, to your outward forms, to your pious deeds and your almsgivings, for something that will move the heart of God; know this, that these things are no lever that can ever move him to love. Nothing but your sin and misery can ever stir his mercy, and you look to the wrong place when you look to your merits to find a plea why he should show pity upon you.”* - Charles Spurgeon