

QUICK THEOLOGY

Freedom from Legalism



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Published by Every Woman a Theologian LLC

Cover design by Eric Novak.

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Printed in the United States of America.



Introduction

Many readers of this booklet have followed *Every Woman a Theologian* for years. You know better than anyone how deeply I care for people trapped in legalism; I would even say that the Christian subgroup I work with most is Christians coming out of legalism into a fully free and confident faith! I am passionate about helping people break free from the chains of legalism—whether conservative legalism or progressive legalism—because I want to see people freed from bondage. Legalism is simply a breeding ground for deconstruction; it causes far more harm than it does good.

People who live in legalistic church environments, where the law is heavy, can remain in a perpetual state of spiritual immaturity or babyhood in their Christian faith. They never actually grow up into a confident faith led by the Holy Spirit and by Scripture. They have a very stunted spiritual experience and oftentimes don't

understand the Holy Spirit. They either live only by the letter of the law or by the license of their will. They don't know how to align themselves to what God is asking in specific circumstances. Knowing this, I am passionate about helping people break free from legalism so they can know Jesus and how good He is. I believe they will experience the abundant life He has promised!

I am also a recovering legalist. I know how tempting it is to turn something into a law. Legalism is man's shortcut to holiness; it is our way out of listening, avoiding intimacy with God; refusing to spend time with Him and instead following the rules and checking the boxes (whether those are conservative boxes or progressive boxes).

I grew up in "purity culture". I wore the purity ring, I read the books, and I didn't date in high school. I could tell you anything you wanted to know about courtship! I was immersed in the culture through my teen years both as a student and as a leader within the movement. I judged the girls who did things differently. I judged the girls who dated or kissed before marriage. But in one year, all the rules I had once accepted as law were overcast with a shadow of a doubt. I suddenly wondered if this Christian life, this righteous living, and this purity were all a big lie. I was at crossroads... and that was the

day I left legalism.

There are entire forums for people who have been scarred by purity culture and fundamentalism. A movement that began with good intentions became a long list of rules, complete with rings, signed commitments, and lists of do's and don'ts to combat a society immersed in "free" sexuality. To most people, it is extremist. But to those within the movement it makes perfect sense. Legalism never starts with judgment; it starts with a genuine desire to please God, because God does command us to walk in purity (1 Cor. 6), and expects holiness from all who claim His name. But that is easier said than done.

Legalism makes holiness seem easy by replacing a living relationship with a list of rules. Legalism starts with God's standards, but it adds to them. Scripture says the marriage bed should be honored (Heb. 13:4), but legalism says courtship is the only way. Legalism says women are to submit to their own husbands... *and* to ALL men within the church; it says wives are to be keepers of the home AND... never work outside of it. These philosophies don't happen overnight, nor do they always begin out of ill will. And they are appealing because they shortcut the walk of faith. Rings and rules are the easy route. It is easier to follow a list than to

pursue the Spirit of God, it is easier to sign a paper than to dedicate our hearts to the Most High, and it is easier to follow the applause of man than to seek the quiet approval of Jesus Christ.



Leaving Legalism

Legalism is sneaky. It convinces us that the guidelines we've added to Scripture - to achieve holiness of course! - were written by God Himself. If we believe that man's rules are actually God's, when those rules fail us we blame God for our disillusionment. But it is not His fault! This is why girls who were raised right rebel, this is why the purity movement often doesn't work, and this is why people reject a "Christianity" that isn't Christianity at all.

God never said we have to marry the first person we date or the first person we kiss. He did say, "be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). God never said women could never speak up in church or have dreams or work outside the home. He did say "wives, submit to your own husbands" (Eph. 5:22). God did not command us to save our first kiss for marriage or to avoid every single thing that could possibly be sexual. He did say to be pure, to treat our bodies as temples of the Holy

Spirit, and to glorify God with them (1 Cor. 6). Legalism drives a wedge between the truth of God and our hearts. It removes the necessity of a daily relationship with the Lord because all we need to do is follow the rules. Legalism is not Spirit-led, it is not Jesus-focused, and it is not grace-driven. Most importantly, God's goal is not to produce a bunch of rule followers but to raise up a spiritual nation of Christ-followers whose dedication to Him produces lives of holiness.

And that is why I left legalism. I stopped following the rules and began seeking the Spirit of the living God. I started listening to the voice I had muffled with my own ideas of what righteousness was supposed to be. I saw God where He waits to be found—in His Word and on my knees in prayer! And as I sought Him, He led me to purity. My husband and I still waited until our wedding day to have sex. I am still involved in my church. I am still pursuing holiness in different areas of life. But I don't choose this because I am bound to a list of limiting rules. I do it because I was shown grace while I was still a Pharisee. I do it because I finally looked in God's Word for myself and read what it said.

Legalistic Christianity is not Christianity. It is man's commentary on God's commands. Galatians 1:9-10 says "If any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what

you received, he is to be accursed. For am I now seeking the favor of men or of God? Or am I striving to please men, if I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.” Don’t be deceived! Look into God’s Word for yourself. Don’t reject God based on the actions of so-called followers. The walk of faith is a walk of freedom. Holiness comes by the Spirit of God inspiring us to action, for Christ came that we may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10).

The legalism I allowed myself to be immersed in was the typical kind, the kind that we most easily recognize and that is most talked about online. It was a conservative legalism: all about what you wear, how you date, what you watch, etc. I do believe what we watch and how we dress matters immensely. We do need to take note of what we are consuming and how it is shaping us! We need a discernment process for choosing holiness. But that is the whole point: It is a discernment process, and it cannot be shortcut by someone else telling you what you can and can’t do.

As a child, I knew people who would go to a movie theater in a city 2 hours away out of fear of what people in our city would say if they were seen at the movies. This sad existence is fear-based conviction, which isn’t true conviction at all! It is legalism. It is law. If we are

afraid of what people will say about our choices, we are not operating in the leadership of Christ. We are not operating in freedom; we are in bondage to what people will say about our choices... which means that our choices are not led by God. Legalism causes us to worship what people say about us. We worship what people think of us instead of operating in the freedom and peace of Christ.



Checking the Boxes

Legalism is the ultimate people pleaser. Because legalism is a form of people-worship, you can have both conservative and progressive legalism. Same system; just a different set of laws.

Conservative legalism includes rules like “Don’t drink, smoke, chew, or go out with boys that do.” Progressive legalism sounds more like, “You need to be more open to dismantling your theology and maybe getting rid of some really important core doctrines about Christ.” Or maybe it’s political, like “You need to vote a certain way or you need to be pro-choice because that’s not a nuanced enough position.” Whatever the countless new rules for Christianity are within an ideological camp is their form of legalism. Each group will claim that you aren’t a loving Christian if you don’t meet specific criteria.

In the book of Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. We love to use this story

to talk about legalism! The parable recounts the story of a Pharisee and a tax collector; both are praying to God. The Pharisee essentially says, “God, thank you so much that I am nothing like those sinners over there—those adulterers and swindlers. Thank you that I am so righteous.” The tax collector, meanwhile, is beating his breast saying, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” When we read that story, we are quick to assume that we are the tax collector and not the Pharisee.

In progressive spaces, there is much pointing of the finger towards the typical conservative legalist as a modern Pharisee. There is little awareness that progressives have become the Pharisee themselves. “God, thank you that I am nothing like those Baptists, or those Mennonites, or those people who are so conservative, or pro-life, or Republican,” they say. But this is the very attitude they claim to oppose! How is this any different than: “God, thank you that I am nothing like those Democrats, or those progressives, or those evil people in our government.”

Do you see the heart issue here? The heart issue is self-righteousness. It is an inability to see a need for God or a need to walk by the Spirit and operate in His sanctification. The question we have to ask is, “Have I assumed that I am the tax collector in the Gospel of

Luke, who is repentant and open to God? Am I actually operating as a Pharisee? Am I living as the one who believes I am sinless and has no need of grace?" People who believe they need no grace will never give grace to others. And that is a characteristic of legalism.

When we begin to designate who gets the grace of God, who is too far gone, who is too pagan, or who is too lost, we have forgotten who the gospel is for. Those who are forgiven much will love much. We don't change the Gospel's heart or make compromises on the truth of Christianity. But we recognize legalism when it is sneaking up on us and we allow the Spirit of God to set us free.



Legalism is not Holiness

The freedom I found in walking away from legalism and the beauty and joy and goodness of following a God who doesn't operate by lists of rules is the delight of my heart. Our God operates in a state of healthy holiness and love and grace! Legalism would keep us from that freedom. How do we recognize the patterns of legalism and heal from them?

Let's review what legalism is: The word "*legal*" obviously has to do with law. In this context it means building your spiritual life and worldview around the Law (supposedly the Law of God). The problem: Legalism actually takes God's Law and builds *on* it and *away* from it. It adds extra regulations that God actually did not give. For example, God says, "be holy, as I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16) and "abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thess. 4:3). Well, we see that law and think, "I need to build a lot of fences to make sure I obey that. So, I'm not going to kiss anybody when I'm dating or maybe I'll avoid

being alone with someone of the opposite sex.” Perhaps those boundaries are good. They could be specific convictions the Holy Spirit supplied.

Such convictions become legalism, however, when we say: “God said that everybody who kisses before marriage is in sin.” Or “God said that if you don’t have somebody chaperoning you, you are in sexual sin.” Or “God said that you could never be alone with somebody of the opposite sex.” Anytime you take personal conviction apply it at large, crediting it to God when God didn’t articulate those specifics, you’re looking at legalism.

Legalism is man’s shortcut to God’s holiness. God says, “Be holy.” Over and over in the Old Testament, in the Law, in the New Testament, in the epistles of Peter, and in the letters of Paul we see God say: “be holy.” We are commanded to follow His good and gracious law. But the crazy thing? The Bible doesn’t actually get into the minutiae of what that should look like. In fact, Jesus calls out the Pharisees for obsessing over the minutiae of tithes instead of giving from a generous and hospitable heart. They missed the point of the Law, which was generosity, and fought about whether they should tithe their herbs and spices down to an exact amount. This is what legalism does.

Legalism is not the same as holiness. God calls us to be holy; that is no question! If you grew up in an oppressively legalistic environment, it's really easy to ride a pendulum to the opposite extreme. But doing whatever we want is called hedonism: living for pleasure. It is a reaction to an oppressive, man-based, fear-based environment. Yet Scripture (and Christ) challenge hedonism, too. If we love Jesus and claim to follow Him, we have to reckon with His words on this. He said, "You are to be holy." He also challenged the Gentiles (the non-Jews) in their hedonism. He challenged those who got drunk, who celebrated in wild partying, who had sex with whoever they wanted. He challenged them just as much as He challenged the Pharisees and their love of the law. Jesus was not someone who could be manipulated or pushed around into an extreme theology. This truth gives us some direction; when we are following Jesus, He will lead us into what I call "holy moderation." This is not just a random middle place that we feel comfortable in; rather it is a Holy Spirit-led moderation.