

Introduction

What Legalism Is, What Legalism Does

The late theologian Dr. John H. Gerstner, when talking about antinomianism, used to paraphrase a hymn by Philip Bliss as follows: “Free from the law, O blessed condition, I can sin as I please and still have remission.”

This book is not about antinomianism, however, but about its equally deadly counterpart, legalism. There is a great need for a book on this topic, I believe.

Ask people to define “legalism” and you will likely get as many different definitions as people asked. It’s a pejorative term that is thrown around a great deal in Christian circles, most often by someone trying to defend a certain behavior or trying to deflect a criticism of their behavior. One person might approach another person to confront him or her about an activity they believe to be wrong or sinful, only to hear this response: “I’m not interested in your legalism!” And the behavior in question may be legitimately and rightly pointed out as wrong according to Scripture, yet the accusation of legalism is supposed to end the discussion. Even if the confronting person can cite an explicit command or clear principle from God’s Word, the predictable response is all too familiar: “Well, that’s just your interpretation.” The spiritual climate today is reminiscent of that tragic statement in the Bible describing the time of Judges when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

One typical definition of “legalism” is “an obsessive concern with rules.” It may also be defined as “a tendency to pay more attention to the letter of the law

than the spirit of the law.” Someone else might suggest that a legalist is someone who is more concerned with law than with grace. All of those are common conceptions, and there’s a bit of truth in each of them. But the real gist of the matter is much deeper than any of those definitions suggest. Let me offer another: Legalism is behavior motivated by the false notion that sinners can earn favor with God, either before or after salvation, through legal means—obedience, ritual, self-denial, or whatever.

There is a memorable scene in the movie “Saving Private Ryan.” Tom Hanks plays a captain who has been sent to rescue Private Ryan (Matt Damon) from the war since three of his brothers have already died in fighting. In this particular scene, Captain Miller (Hanks) has been shot and is dying. Private Ryan has been pulled out of the fighting and is to go home. He sees that the man who saved his life is dying and leans over to hear his last words, and they are telling: “Earn this. Earn it.”

In essence, that’s what legalism says: “Earn this,” whether it’s salvation or sanctification. Legalism says that the presence of certain behaviors or the absence of other ones can make us more favorable to God, more worthy in God’s eyes, than we might otherwise be.

And even among those who rightly understand that salvation is a gift of God’s free grace, apart from any merit of human works, it is far too often the case that people think they can earn or merit God’s increased favor by what they do or don’t do as redeemed people. This is a terrible insult to the finished work of Christ, for it is saying that what Christ accomplished for me is not enough to receive God’s favor, but what I do myself will make up the difference.