



3 Miseries of Legalism

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Legalism is attempting to earn God's approval with our works. It is man's attempt to qualify himself to stand before God on his own merits. We are recovering legalists, for there was a time, before Christ rescued us, when we attempted to find our joy in ourselves, our salvation by ourselves. Now we trust His perfect and sufficient work for us on the cross instead of our works.

But because we are recovering legalists, we still wrestle with returning to our good deeds to alleviate our guilty consciences, earn God's favor, or distinguish ourselves from other people. Because of this, the apostle Paul reminds us of the misery and futility of legalism. "Christ has liberated us to be free. Stand firm then and don't submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). With legalism:

Your joy is never full

If we seek God's approval in our own works, our joy is never full. We are burdened down with a yoke of slavery. Christ is of no benefit to those who seek salvation in themselves (Galatians 5:2), which means joy always alludes the legalist as joy is found only in Him. As C.S. Lewis stated, "God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing."

Your work is never finished

Legalism is exhausting because there is always something else to do. As believers in the Galatian churches considered circumcision to attempt to earn God's favor, Paul declared that "*every man who gets himself circumcised...is obligated to keep the entire law.*" In other words, if you want to stand on your own works, you have to be able to keep all of the law, which none of us can. If you want to achieve, the work never ends. The work is never over. Thankfully, grace is received, not achieved. And the work is over as Jesus yelled out, "It is finished."

Your standing is never secure

Legalism leaves people wondering if they are ever secure, if their works are ever enough. They are not. If our works could be sufficient, then Christ died for nothing (Galatians 2:21). So Christ is alienated from those who seek to justify themselves by their own works (Galatians 5:4). But for those of us who trust Christ and His finished work on the cross, our standing is secure, not because of us but because of Him. Those who realize and confess their weakness and need for grace are secure. Those who think they are strong in themselves are never secure.