



## CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 188

All false views of sanctification fall under two main heresies, which oppose and distort biblical teachings, undermining a believer's growth in holiness. Christians have easily been drawn to either of these extremes. In this study we will begin our look at the first of these, known as the heresy of legalism.

**Legalism** – In Christian theology legalism is a distortion or abuse of the law of God. There are different forms of legalism, some obvious and others subtle. The first and most dangerous form of legalism is that which teaches that by keeping various laws, by doing good works, man can obtain salvation.

In the New Testament we see the Pharisees, the “separated ones,” who separated themselves from the ordinary people, and prided themselves on their own righteousness as the children of Abraham, considering their fastidious adherence to the law as the means of their right standing with God. However, Jesus severely rebuked them, calling them hypocrites, who not only did not see their depraved sinful state, but also did not understand the demands of the holy and just God; and thus exchanged the authoritative law of God for the traditions of men (Matthew 15:3, 7-9; 23:23-28, 33).

Christ pronounced God's judgment upon the Pharisees, exposing them for focusing on the external aspects of the law while neglecting its true internal and spiritual meaning; and thus rejecting the true righteousness which is from God, and instead embracing their own man-made righteousness, which is false and damning before God. We see such legalism alive and thriving in our day, with all the world religions, which reject the God of the Bible and His Gospel, and instead have devised their own standards of laws, rules and customs, which they keep, and by which they seek to achieve holiness and salvation. All such man-made laws and customs are unacceptable and repugnant to God.

In the New Testament we see another dangerous form of legalism as expressed by the Judaizers. The Judaizers were false teachers who had crept into the church and were teaching Gentile Christians that in addition to Christ they needed to observe certain Mosaic laws for salvation. Paul vehemently opposed and repudiated the Judaizers, because they sought to add works to the gospel as necessary for salvation, and thus were perverting the true gospel of Christ (Galatians 1:6-8; 3:1-3). Paul warned believers that all who want to add any works as part of their salvation, are in effect returning to the tyranny and curse of the law, and thus become obligated to keep the whole law, for God demands total perfection (Deuteronomy 27:26; Matthew 5:48; Galatians 3:10-12; 5:1-4; James 2:10). And if they did that they would be denying the all-sufficiency of Christ, and would be abandoning the grace and gospel of God. But Paul was confident that all who were truly saved would be kept from such a heresy (Galatians 5:10).

Salvation demands perfect righteousness, and that is only found in Christ, who through His life and death satisfied the divine requirement. God graciously imputes Christ's righteousness to us by faith and faith alone (Romans 3:20-22; Galatians 3:11-14; 2 Timothy 1:8-9). This was precisely the issue for which the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformers fought, for the true gospel of Christ had thus been obscured in the medieval church. The Reformers proclaimed that justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone. As we saw in the study of justification, both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologies teach a synergist concept of justification, where the cooperation of divine grace and human works is needed for salvation. For both, to justify is not to declare just but to make just. Thus, both teach a legalistic view of salvation, very much like the Judaizers of the first century! And as Paul warned, such a gospel is a “different” gospel, and in reality it is no gospel at all, for its end is damnation.

There is yet another more subtle form of legalism, which relates more specifically to a Christian's life of sanctification, which can easily entangle Christians, causing great confusion, pain, and hindrance in their pursuit of holiness. We will look at this form of legalism in our next study.