



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 192

Where do legalistic ideas come from? First, ideas that certain practices are sinful but which the Bible does not teach so, like every other false or faulty doctrine, come from a poor understanding of biblical passages, their historical and theological context, thus arriving at incorrect interpretations. Furthermore, majority of these rules originate from believers' personal lives, where believers who have certain weaknesses and failings, build their own personal boundaries or fences in order to restrain and protect themselves from falling into sin. We all have such boundaries in our lives, such as deciding not to watch TV, use the internet, to go to particular places, drink alcohol, and so on.

Personal fences should not be imposed on others – Having such personal rules or fences is a good thing, wise and discerning thing to do, which help us in our sanctification, in our mortification of the old man and vivification of the new man. However, the problem starts when we take such personal boundaries and then impose them on everyone else, that is, we make them rules in our church that apply to all believers. By doing this we have introduced legalistic ideas into the church, where manmade rules are elevated to the level of, or even supplant, biblical commands and principles (Mark 7:1-9). Based on such manmade lists of “do’s and don’ts” we then begin to act as if these were biblical mandates, and thus begin to judge others, considering ourselves and others who obey such rules as more mature or spiritual Christians, and look down on those who don’t as immature or worldly Christians.

Tyranny of the weak – By demanding others to conform to things which the Bible does not teach we in effect become guilty of binding the consciences of believers, who do not share our scruples, and where God has left them free. Those whose consciences are free should not flaunt their freedom, but are to love their weaker brothers, to be patient with them, and to exercise their freedom in private, and at the right time assist them to better understand their freedom in Christ. Those whose consciences are weak, at times do judge those whose consciences are free, imposing their legalistic ideas on them, and thus deny them their freedom in Christ. This is sometimes referred to as the tyranny of the weaker brother. When this happens, the weak in the faith are to be firmly corrected (Galatians 2:11-14), and the mature in the faith are to stand fast in their freedom, and must never allow the weak to bind them where God has left them free; otherwise legalism will enter the church and ultimately destroy the gospel (Galatians 5:1).

Faithful study and application of biblical principles – Thus the answer to legalism, the best way to avoid it in our lives and in the church, is to carefully and diligently study the Word of God, correctly understand what God commands and prohibits, and thus distinguish things which are morally indifferent matters. Doing this will continuously inform and shape our consciences, allowing us to properly understand our freedom in Christ, realizing that morally indifferent matters are not sinful in themselves, and though they can be put to evil uses, they can also be used properly without sin. All this calls for wisdom in order to faithfully apply biblical principles, live lives that bless and build up others, and bring glory to God (1 Corinthians 10:31; 2 Corinthians 1:12; Hebrews 13:18).

Pastors' role in preventing legalism – In addition to this, pastors also have a very significant role to play in preventing and eradicating legalism in the church. They are to exercise great care in the correct interpretation and teaching of Scripture and biblical principles to the church. They are to avoid teaching and imposing manmade lists of “do’s and don’ts” as norms for all to follow. They are also to avoid focusing on the dangers of certain morally indifferent matters, while neglecting the dangers of other, perhaps more socially acceptable indifferent matters. Ultimately, pastors are to teach biblical principles and how believers are to apply them in their daily lives, and thus equipping them to correctly discern what is right and wrong, what builds up the church and brings glory to God. By this, all believers, strong and weak, will grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, and the dangers and conflicts of legalism will fade, and the church will be united, pursuing that which pleases God.