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The Legalist's Distortion

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

One of the most serious ways in which people are drawn away from the life that pleases God is by falling into the trap of legalism. Legalism comes in many forms, from compromising the doctrine of justification to divorcing the letter and the spirit of the law, from elevating man-made laws to the same level as God's law to finding technical loopholes in the law. In this lesson, Dr. Sproul explores many of the deadly forms that legalism takes and explains why all must be avoided.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to define the basic concept of legalism.
2. To be able to outline some of the many forms of legalism.

QUOTATIONS

We are all legalistic by nature; that is, we innately think so much performance by us earns so much blessing from God.

— Jerry Bridges

Make not laws upon the saints where Christ hath not made any.

— Walter Craddock

LECTURE OUTLINE

- I. Introduction
 - A. The twin disasters that attempt to disrupt those Christians seeking to live a godly life are legalism and antinomianism.
 - B. "Antinomianism" simply means "anti-law-ism" and will be discussed in the next lecture.

C. Legalism is a very broad concept that includes several different types or forms.

II. The First Type of Legalism—Abstracting the Law from Its Context

- A. The original context in which God gave the law was that of a covenant.
- B. God first graciously redeemed the people, then He began to define the laws that are pleasing to Him.
- C. The legalist isolates the rules and the laws from the God who gives the laws.
- D. This type of legalism results in an externalized keeping of rules without any personal relationship, any love, or any joy.

III. The Second Type of Legalism—Divorcing the Letter from the Spirit of the Law

- A. If someone drives his car fifty miles an hour at all times because that is the speed he likes to drive, then there will be times when he is technically obeying the speed limit.
- B. This kind of obedience is purely external and ignores the underlying spirit of the law.

IV. The Third Type of Legalism—Adding Man-Made Laws to God's Law

- A. This type of legalism is the most deadly to the kingdom of God.
- B. Throughout the history of Israel and the Church, men have added all kinds of legislation to the law of God that was said to bind men's consciences.
- C. While the Church does have the right to have policies and regulations, it does not have the right to elevate them in an ultimate way.
- D. It is even worse when these man-made rules and regulations are made a test of true Christianity.
- E. It is a violation of the Gospel because it substitutes human tradition for the real fruits of the Spirit.
- F. It comes perilously close to blasphemy by misrepresenting Christ.
- G. The Gospel is an offense to the world, but we are not to add to that offense by distorting what Christianity is.

V. The Fourth Type of Legalism—Majoring in the Minors

- A. The Pharisees were notorious for observing the minutiae of the law while missing the deeper issues.
- B. The Church does the same when it makes the test of Christianity such simplistic external things as dancing and wearing makeup.
- C. It is far easier to get recognition by not smoking, drinking, or dancing than it is to be known for honor, trustworthiness, justness, and mercy.

VI. The Fifth Type of Legalism—Loophole-ism

- A. The Pharisees were masters of finding ways to get around the spirit of the law.
- B. Technicalities of all kinds are seized upon to justify what is easily recognized as a real violation of the true intent of the law.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. _____ simply means “anti-law-ism.”
 - a. Loophole-ism
 - b. Legalism
 - c. Antinomianism
 - d. Pharisaism

2. The original context in which God gave the law was that of a _____.
 - a. War
 - b. Covenant
 - c. Marriage
 - d. Debate

3. What type of legalism is the most deadly to the kingdom of God?
 - a. Adding man-made laws to God’s law
 - b. Loophole-ism
 - c. Majoring in the minors
 - d. Abstracting the law from its context

BIBLE STUDY

1. What type of legalism is illustrated in Matthew 15:3–9?
2. What type of legalism is illustrated in Matthew 23:23–24?
3. What type of legalism is illustrated in Matthew 23:27–28?
4. What type of legalism is illustrated in Mark 7:5–13?
5. What type of legalism is illustrated in Galatians 5:1–4?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Many Christians, especially those who are heirs of pietistic nineteenth century revivalism, have adopted a moralism that identifies true Christians as those who abstain from certain activities deemed “worldly” by certain leaders. Over the years, refraining from engaging in activities such as card-playing, dancing, consuming alcohol, moviegoing, and wearing of makeup has been used as a test of true Christianity. What is the error involved in this?

2. Provide examples of each of the five types of legalism described by Dr. Sproul. Which are the most pervasive in modern Christianity as a whole, in your denomination as a whole, in your local church, in your own life? What must be done to counter these tendencies?

APPLICATION

1. Has legalism in any of its various forms been a problem in your Christian life? If so, seek God in prayer. Find and read a good balanced explanation of the role of law in the Christian life (e.g., Calvin's *Institutes*, II:vii–viii; Michael Horton, *The Law of Perfect Freedom*).
2. If you have made observance of man-made rules a test of Christianity or fellowship in the past, seek reconciliation and forgiveness.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Horton, Michael. *The Law of Perfect Freedom*