

Legalism: I'm Okay, You're Not

Legalism is the practice of setting standards for spiritual performance that are additional to the ones set by God. They may even be that replace God's standards. Legalism is works-based pseudo spirituality where people illegitimately take responsibility for other's spiritual growth and maturity. Legalists expect everyone to adhere to their standards.

Legalists are rule-keepers and their connection with God is all about laws, not about relationship. Their rules and regulations must be strictly enforced and every believer must do the same as them – even if they don't state this premise. Mathematical and scientific thinkers are prone to legalism as are those who like lists and categories because everything is clear-cut and above-board with this type of Greek-styled reasoning

Keeping rules doesn't require us to operate in love and forgiveness, so legalists are very unloving, hard people. Legalism kills the life of freedom based on faith. Strangely, legalists have an unconscious mentality that God will go easy on them because we've been trying so hard to please him. They also think God sees them as better than other Christians.

Here are a few common legalistic traits that need to be continually watched for to avoid the trap:

“They can't celebrate other Christians' successes. Legalists can't stand to see another believer prospering. They can't believe that anyone could be trying harder than they are, so no one deserves God's favor more than they do. Legalists are typically envious of and even hateful toward other believers.

They feel the need to defend themselves. Good legalists don't understand grace, so they can't afford to have a bad day. When they do fail, they're not able to really own up to it and confess it. Legalists have to make excuses and defend themselves; otherwise they'd have to admit that their best efforts aren't working.

They feel entitled. Legalists believe that God owes them favor and blessing. Their rule keeping and hard work have surely merited some special treatment from God.

They want what God can do for them more than they want to be with him. True legalists don't understand that Christianity is deeply rooted in love. Theirs is not a father/son or father/daughter relationship. It's more of an employer/employee or commander/soldier relationship. Legalists view God as someone to be appeased so they can get what they need or want from him. Their goal is God's presents, not God's presence.

They can't extend grace to others. Those who live by rule keeping judge others by the same standard. Legalists can't afford to extend grace to someone who fails. That violates the whole rule-keeping mind-set. If someone fails, it's simply because they weren't trying hard enough.

They deserve not grace but consequences. Because legalists live by the “I can” mind-set, they aren't quick to extend grace to those who can't.

They typically struggle with secret sin. The spiritual bankruptcy of the rule-keeping life will inevitably lead to a great deal of emotional and spiritual pain. Legalists won't be able to live up to their own standards and will have to deal with the obvious duplicity of what they say on one hand and do on the other. Such ongoing shame and inner conflict will typically lead to some type of secret sin such as binge eating, alcoholism or workaholism, prescription drug abuse, or a pornography habit, as the struggling legalists will seek to medicate the pain that is flowing out of their failing and flawed religious system.”¹

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