

Dead Church Podcast Notes

Acts Initiative

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Ep. 6 – Lies Christians Believe About Legalism

As we've already seen, we can't just go through life saying, "I believe in Jesus; therefore, I'm a Christian and I'm saved." Because that's not really what the Bible teaches. However, most Christians today don't realize that this isn't what the Bible teaches. Most Christians follow the teaching of men without even realizing it. They think they're following Scripture, but they're only following what men have told them Scripture teaches.

So, in the next two videos, I want to address two common responses that a lot of Christians will bring up when talking about faith, obedience, repentance and how all this works together.

The first response that most Christians bring up is: "How do you avoid legalism?" or "How do you avoid being legalistic about it?"

First of all, what do people mean when they say *legalism*?

The definition of *legalism* is:

1. Strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code¹

Basically, when people ask "how do you avoid legalism?" what they mean is, "how do you avoid feeling like you have to do certain things in order to have a right relationship with God?"

This is something that the Church teaches a lot. They say, "We have to avoid being legalistic, because we have to remember that we're saved by faith and not by works. We have to remember that we're saved by believing in Jesus and not by earning our way to God by doing things." This is a common topic in the Church, so it's one of the first things that Christians will bring up when we talk about how obedience is required according to what Scripture teaches.

Typically, when Christians talk about legalism, they talk about two separate things. The first one is the Pharisees.

The Pharisees

The Church tells us the Pharisees were legalistic – that they were strictly following a huge list of rules, trying to earn their way to God. They tell us that we don't want to be like that. They warn us that we don't want to be legalistic like the Pharisees.

So, the question is – were the Pharisees legalistic? And, if so, is it something we should avoid?

It's true that we don't want to be like the Pharisees – Jesus very clearly condemned the Pharisees for the way they were behaving, acting, and teaching. But what was it that Jesus was condemning them for? The Church tells us it was legalism. The Church tells us it was their strict adherence to the rules and laws that they felt like they absolutely had to follow. The Church tells us that the problem of the Pharisees was that they were too strict in trying to follow every single written

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legalism>

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law in the Law of Moses.

But that's not true.

Jesus didn't speak against the Pharisees because of their legalism. In fact, he said the exact opposite of what the Church tells us. This is what Jesus said:

“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”²

This is something Jesus warned about numerous times – the leaven of the Pharisees. What does that mean?

First, we need to understand what leaven is.

Leaven is essentially yeast. When you're baking bread, you put just a tiny little amount of yeast into the dough, and that makes the entire batch of dough rise.

Leaven was a concept used all throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament. For example, the Jews were told in the Old Testament to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread.³ The Feast of Unleavened Bread was a reminder to them of when they first left Egypt. When they left Egypt, they didn't have time to put the leaven into the bread and wait for it to rise. They had to cook the bread and eat it without leaven, because they were in a hurry. The Feast of Unleavened Bread reminded them of this. After the feast, they would continue eating unleavened bread for a week – celebrating Passover. Passover, which also reminded the people of their exodus from Egypt, was eaten with unleavened bread.

In the New Testament, Paul referenced the bread eaten at Passover. He said, “Your boasting is not good. You know the saying, ‘Just a little leaven makes the whole batch of dough rise.’ Take out all the old leaven so that you will be a new batch of dough without leaven, which you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. So let us celebrate this feast, but not with the bread that has the old leaven – the leaven of sin and wickedness. Let us celebrate this feast with the bread that has no leaven – the bread of sincerity and truth.”⁴

Paul was comparing the bread in the Passover feast to our lives, saying that our lives should be like bread with no leaven in it – the leaven being sin and wickedness. We should be unleavened bread that has no sin and wickedness in us. If we let sin and wickedness in, it will spread – just like a little bit of leaven makes an entire batch of dough rise.

So, Paul compared leaven to sin. Paul also compared leaven to false teaching. He used that exact same quote (“just a little leaven makes the same batch of dough rise”) to explain that leaven is like false teaching in the Church. If you put just a little bit of false teaching into the Church, it will spread throughout the entire Church.

He said, “You were running a good race. Who stopped you from following the truth? This change did not come from the One who called you. Be careful! ‘Just a little leaven makes the whole batch of dough rise.’ But I have confidence in the Lord that you will not believe those different ideas. Whoever is confusing you with such ideas will pay the penalty, no matter who he is.”⁵

So, in Scripture we see this idea of leaven as sin and false teaching.

And Jesus warned his disciples, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”⁶ Essentially, Jesus was saying that we should beware of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees because it's wicked, it's false teaching, and it's going to spread if you let it in.

If you let hypocrisy in, it will spread.

Here's the point: Jesus didn't say, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is legalism.”

² Luke 12:1

³ Ref. Exodus 12:15-20; Leviticus 23:6; Numbers 28:17; Deuteronomy 16:1-4

⁴ 1 Corinthians 5:6-8

⁵ Galatians 5:7-10

⁶ Ref. Luke 12:1

In fact, legalism is never even mentioned in the Bible. It's never brought up. It's never talked about. The words *legalism*, *legalistic*, and *legalist* don't ever once appear in Scripture. Nowhere in the Bible does it warn about legalism. But it does warn about hypocrisy.

So, what is hypocrisy?

We typically read the word *hypocrite* in English and think it refers to *someone who says one thing but does something else*. While that's close, it's not the full meaning of the word.

The word *hypocrite*, in ancient Greek, was used to refer to an actor on a stage. So, *hypocrite* meant *actor*.

So, when Jesus said, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy," he was saying, "they're a bunch of actors." And, what is an actor? An actor is someone who is pretending to be something they're not. It's someone who is pretending they're a different person, but in reality, that's not who they are at all. He was not saying to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is legalism – a strict adherence to rules and law. He was warning that the Pharisees were a bunch of actors pretending to be something that they're not.

Furthermore, Jesus explained specifically how the Pharisees were actors, and what he had to say about them demonstrated that he didn't think they were being too strict, or that they were too concerned about conforming to the rules and laws. No – he was actually warning that the Pharisees were not obeying God in the first place. They were not obeying God at all – the opposite of legalism.

Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Why do you refuse to obey God's command for the sake of your traditions?"⁷ He also said, "You rejected the word of God for the sake of your own tradition. You are hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people show honor to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is worthless. The things they teach are nothing but human rules.'"⁸

Jesus said to the Pharisees, "You abandoned the commands of God, and you hold only to human traditions." Then Jesus said to them, "You are very good at ignoring the commands of God so you can follow your own tradition."⁹

He said again, "By your own tradition, which you have handed down, you are rejecting what God said. And you do many things like that."¹⁰

So, what do we see from this?

Jesus was not telling the Pharisees, "You guys are strictly adhering to the Law, and you're being too knit-picky about it." No, he was saying the exact opposite. He was saying, "You are not obeying the Law. You are not obeying what God said to do. You've replaced what God said to do with your own traditions."

He was not rebuking them for legalism. He was rebuking them because they were not obeying – they were not conforming to what God wanted. That's the exact opposite of legalism.

He was saying, "You guys are pretending to be people that follow God, but you're not actually obeying him." That's the opposite of legalism. That's hypocrisy. That's acting. He was saying, "You guys are a bunch of actors. You are acting like godly, righteous men but you're not actually doing what God said to do."

Jesus continued warning about the Pharisees, saying, "They do good things so that other

⁷ Matthew 15:3

⁸ Matthew 15:6-9

⁹ Mark 7:8-9

¹⁰ Mark 7:13

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people will see them. They enlarge their phylacteries, and they lengthen their tassels.”¹¹

Phylacteries were boxes with Scripture in them that they would wear on their head because they were trying to follow a law that said they should bind the Law to their foreheads.¹² Their tassels served a similar purpose. They took a law which was intended to be metaphorical, and they literally did what the law said to do – they actually tied Scripture to their foreheads. But Jesus wasn’t saying that their problem was that they wore phylacteries and tassels. He was saying that their problem was that they did it for show – they did it to impress people around them, not because they feared and loved God.

He wasn’t rebuking them for their strict adherence and literal conformity to a law that was intended to be metaphorical. He wasn’t really bothered by that at all. What bothered him was the fact that they were only doing it for human respect. What bothered him was that they really only cared about gaining the respect and admiration of others.

He then continued, “Those Pharisees and teachers of the law love to have the most important seats at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues. They love people to greet them with respect in the marketplaces, and they love to have people call them, ‘Rabbi.’”¹³

Again – Jesus was saying that the Pharisees did things for show – not for obedience. They were doing things because they wanted to be seen by others – not because they loved God and were trying to obey his commands. His problem with them was not some kind of strict adherence to the Law. He wasn’t warning about them being legalistic. He was warning about their showmanship – that they were only doing things because they wanted other people to see them and respect them.

They were only doing things because they were a bunch of actors. They were hypocrites. They didn’t actually care about following God and doing what God said; they just wanted people to recognize them and greet them and give them the best seats and the highest honor.

So, Jesus didn’t rebuke them because they were trying hard to obey the Law. No – Jesus rebuked them because they weren’t concerned about obeying the Law. He rebuked them because they didn’t care about obeying God – they only cared about gaining the respect of other people.

Again – that’s not legalism. Legalism is when someone cares too much about obeying the rules and laws. But Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because they didn’t care at all.

He also said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! You are hypocrites! You pay tithes on everything you have – even your mint, dill, and cumin. But you ignore the really important teachings of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness.¹⁴ These are the things you should do, without neglecting those other things. Blind guides! You are like a person who picks a fly out of a drink and then swallows a camel!”¹⁵

So again, Jesus was saying that the Pharisees paid tithes on everything. Tithes were in the Law of Moses. It was something God had commanded his people to do. Jesus didn’t say, “You guys are being too strict! You’re paying tithes on your mint, your dill, and your cumin – you’re going overboard with it!” No – that’s not what he said! He said, “You’re tithing, but you’re neglecting what God actually cares about – the weightier matters, the more important teachings. Justice. Mercy. Faithfulness. You’re ignoring what’s actually important to God!”

Elsewhere, he said that all of the Law and the prophets are summed up in “love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁶ That’s what’s most important – love – loving God and loving others. That’s what all of the Law is really about. Similarly, Jesus often quoted a verse that says,

¹¹ Matthew 23:5

¹² Ref. Deuteronomy 6:6-8, 11:18

¹³ Matthew 23:6-7

¹⁴ “faithfulness” is *pístis*

¹⁵ Matthew 23:23-24

¹⁶ Ref. Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:28-34; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”¹⁷ Jesus kept telling the Pharisees that they were missing the point – they didn’t understand what God really cares about.

Jesus was saying that what’s really most important to God is mercy, justice, and faithfulness. What’s most important is that you’re loving your neighbor as you love yourself. That’s what the Law is truly teaching.

But the Pharisees weren’t doing that. They weren’t obeying the Law. They were tithing – they were doing their religious duties – but they were neglecting the things that were most important.

Notice how strict the Pharisees were about their tithe – they tithed even on the herbs they grew in their gardens. But Jesus didn’t say, “You guys are being too strict about your tithe.” No – in fact, he said, “You should continue doing those things, but you need to stop neglecting the important things. Stop neglecting mercy, justice, and faithfulness. Stop neglecting the things God really cares about. Don’t neglect your tithe – but also don’t neglect the important matters.”

Jesus wasn’t bothered by their apparent legalism. He wasn’t bothered with how strictly they were tithing. He was bothered by the fact that they were not obeying the Law in the matters that were most important. The Law is summed up in love – and they weren’t doing it.

He didn’t rebuke them for legalistically adhering to the Law.

He rebuked them for being lawbreakers.

The Church often mentions the Pharisees as examples of legalism – they tell us we shouldn’t be legalistic like the Pharisees. But the Pharisees weren’t legalistic. Jesus never once corrected them for being too strict about obeying the Law. He never corrected them for trying to obey God too hard.

Jesus rebuked them for doing the exact opposite. He rebuked them because they refused to obey God. He rebuked them because they didn’t take the Law serious enough.

If we try to be different than the Pharisees by trying to not be legalistic, we could very well end up inadvertently becoming exactly like the Pharisees. Because the Pharisees weren’t legalistic either. They didn’t care about obeying God. They didn’t think it was important.

The Pharisees weren’t legalistic, they were lawless. They were actors. They acted like they cared about God, but they didn’t obey the Law.

As I mentioned earlier, there are two things people tend to bring up when talking about legalism. The first was the Pharisees. The second is Paul.

Paul

Paul said, “For you have been saved by grace through faith [*πίστις*]. You did not save yourselves; it was a gift from God. It was not the result of works, so that no one can boast.”¹⁸

Christians say, “You don’t want to be legalistic; you can’t earn your way to God. It’s not a result of works so that no one can boast. If you’re trying to obey God in order to earn your way to him, you’d be able to boast about it, but Paul said no one can boast.”

Right. But here’s the thing: There’s another verse that sounds like the exact opposite of what Paul said. We’ve talked about it earlier in this series:

“So you see that people are justified by their works, not by faith only.”¹⁹

So, we have two seemingly contradictory ideas. Paul said we’re saved by grace, through faith, and that it’s not a result of works so that no man can boast. But James said we’re saved by works, and not by faith alone.

Both ideas are found in the Bible. We can’t just focus on one and dismiss the other. These

¹⁷ Ref. Matthew 9:13; 12:7 where Jesus was quoting Hosea 6:6

¹⁸ Ephesians 2:8-9

¹⁹ James 2:24

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two verses are completely compatible – otherwise the Bible isn't true.

As we've already mentioned, *faith* is the word *pistis*. In Greek, it didn't just mean *faith* – it meant *faith* and *faithfulness*, *belief* and *obedience*, *trust* and *loyalty*. It meant fidelity. It meant reliability. When Paul said we're not saved by works, we're saved by faith, he was referring to this reliability, fidelity, and loyalty. He was referring to faithfulness – not just belief. And when James said we are justified by works, not by faith alone, he was clarifying that it is more than just belief – it's fidelity, faithfulness, and reliability.

The only difference between what Paul said and what James said is that they're referring to two different kinds of works.

When Paul said that we're saved by faith, and not works, he was referring to works of the Law of Moses. He was referring to the people who try to get to God by obeying rules. The only way to be saved through this kind of "works" is if you never once break the Law. The Law said that if you disobey one law, you're guilty of breaking all of the Law, and the punishment is death.²⁰ Paul was saying that you can't enter God's presence this way because no one has done that – everyone has already broken the Law at some point in their life. Everyone has broken the Law of Moses, so you can't be saved by adhering to the Law – you've already broken it! It's over! If you're trying to be saved by adhering to the Law, you're already condemned, because you have already broken the Law at some point.

James, on the other hand, is referring to works of fidelity, loyalty, and faithfulness. He was referring to the kinds of works that come as part of our faith. If we're truly loyal to God, we will want to do what God wants. If we're truly faithful to God, we will obey him out of love – not out of an obligation to obey rules. If we have fidelity to him, then our actions will flow out of that fidelity. James said that we are justified by our works because he was referring to works of loyalty – works of love. He was saying that we are justified by being the kind of people who obey God and do what God wants because we love God and we're loyal to him. We're justified when our actions of obedience naturally flow out of a heart of love. If we truly love God, we will obey him.

James was not saying that we're saved by obeying rules.

Paul was not saying that we're saved without having any good works.

They were both saying the same thing.

In fact, Paul very strongly preached that people need to obey Jesus in order to be saved.²¹ When Paul wrote to Titus, he gave a list of different ways that different people in different situations in life should be living. He talked about older men; he talked about older women; he talked about young women; he talked about husband and wives; he talked about slaves, or servants. And then after he told people, "This is how you should generally be living in these different situations in life," he said:

"That is the way we should live, because God's grace that can save everyone has been revealed. It trains us to reject ungodly living and the evil things the world wants to do. Instead, that grace teaches us to live in the present age in a self-controlled and right way and in a way that shows we serve God. We should live like that while we wait for our great hope and the coming of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. He gave himself for us so he might pay the price to free us from all wickedness and to make us pure people who belong only to him – people who are always wanting to do good deeds."²²

²⁰ Ref. James 2:10-11; Galatians 5:3; Deuteronomy 27:26

²¹ Ref. Acts 26:20; Romans 3:31, 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 5:13-17, 6:7-10; Ephesians 2:10, 5:15-17; Philippians 4:9; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; Titus 1:16, 2:11-14, 3:8

²² Titus 2:11-14

Earlier, we saw that Paul said we're saved "by grace, through faith..." Here, Paul expounded on that grace. Grace is not just forgiveness. Grace is not just mercy. According to Paul, God's grace trains us. It teaches us to reject ungodly living. It teaches us to reject the evil things the world wants to do. God's grace trains us to live the right way. It teaches us self-control. It teaches us to serve God.

God's grace is more than just forgiveness, mercy, and kindness. His grace changes who we are. It changes our nature. It makes us into people who always want to do good deeds.

God's grace produces works.

Therefore, if you don't have works – the "good deeds" kind of works – then you're not saved. If you don't have works, then you haven't been transformed by God's grace.

Paul also said, "Our people must learn to use their lives for doing good deeds to meet urgent needs so that their lives will not be unfruitful."²³

According to Paul, if you don't use your life for doing good deeds to meet urgent needs, then your life is unfruitful. Good fruit is about doing good deeds. It's about meeting urgent needs. If you don't have good fruit, then you're not saved. John the Baptist and Jesus both said that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.²⁴ Therefore, if someone is not using their life for the purpose of doing good deeds in order to meet urgent needs, then they will be cut down and thrown into the fire!

Paul knew what it meant to be unfruitful. He knew what Jesus said, and he knew what John the Baptist had said. He knew that if someone is unfruitful, then they're not saved. And he said that a person is only fruitful if they're doing good deeds.

In other words, Paul said that people are saved by works – just like James.

As we mentioned in an earlier video, Paul summarized his entire life's message by saying, "I began telling people that they should repent and do works..."²⁵

Paul did not preach that we're saved without works. He was only preaching that we can't be saved merely by trying to follow all the rules. However, if we don't have works, then we don't have salvation. Paul never taught anything else.

These are just a few examples. Paul repeatedly taught that works are essential for salvation. In fact, the vast majority of his letters are teaching people that they must have good works! He was instructing people what their lives should look like. He summed up his instructions by saying, "The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith. But some people have missed this whole point. They have turned away from these things and spend their time in meaningless discussions."²⁶

Paul was saying that all his instructions are really trying to teach people what it means to live in love. He was teaching a love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and a genuine faith – or, fidelity. In other words, he was teaching the same thing James taught.

James taught people that they needed to have good works – works of love. James was saying, "this is required for salvation." Paul wouldn't have argued with that. Paul also taught that it was required. Paul's letters are all about how Christians should have love – they must have good works.

Those good works are the kind of works that are required for salvation. Those good works are the kind of works that come from a truly repentant heart. Those good works are the kind of works that naturally appear in someone's life if they've died with Jesus and have risen into a new life.

The works required for salvation are not the works of the Law of Moses.

For example, Paul wrote, "It is not important if a man is circumcised or not. The important

²³ Titus 3:14

²⁴ Ref. Matthew 3:9-10, 7:16-19; Luke 3:9

²⁵ Acts 26:20

²⁶ 1 Timothy 1:5-6 (NLT)

thing is obeying God’s commands.”²⁷

This is a bit confusing, because circumcision was in the Law of Moses – it was a command from God. Paul said it isn’t important if someone is circumcised – yet, in the same breath, he said that it is important to obey God’s commands.

In other words, in this one verse, Paul was essentially saying “you are not saved by works,” but also, “you are justified by works.” He was saying the same thing he said to the Ephesians, but also the same thing James said.

This is because there are two different types of works mentioned in the Bible. Circumcision was a work of the Law of Moses. It was something the Law told people to do – but it was simply foreshadowing what Jesus accomplished. Paul wrote about circumcision, saying, “In Christ you were also circumcised, but not with a circumcision done by hands. It was a circumcision done by Christ, which cut away the body of flesh”²⁸

He also said, “We are the ones who are truly circumcised.”²⁹

In other words, Jesus fulfilled circumcision. Jesus fulfilled many of the things the Law instructed people to do – the food laws, the sacrifices, the circumcision, the washings, and other ceremonial rituals. Hebrews tells us that those things were merely foreshadowing Jesus.³⁰ Paul also said those rules were a shadow of the substance that has now come.³¹

Those rituals, rules, special days, sacrifices, and ceremonies are the works that Paul was referring to when he said we’re not saved by works. Those things were fulfilled in Jesus. They pointed to Jesus, and they pointed to true salvation – salvation through fidelity.

With those religious laws fulfilled, the only thing left is love. As Jesus said, “Do to others what you want them to do to you. This sums up the Law and the Prophets.”³²

With the religious laws fulfilled, we are left only with the laws about love. Or, in other words, good deeds – the same kind of works Paul instructed people to have, and the same kind of works James instructed people to have.

As Paul said, “the person who loves others has obeyed all the law... Love never hurts a neighbor, so loving is obeying all the law.”³³

All the Law, all the prophets, and all of Paul’s instructions are summed up in love.

Paul was not teaching us that we don’t have to obey. He wasn’t teaching that we don’t have to have works. He wasn’t warning us about legalism. He was teaching people to obey God out of loyalty and love instead of religion. He was teaching people to have good works – because good works of love fulfill what remains of the Law.

Once again, just as we saw with the Pharisees, legalism wasn’t the topic. Legalism is not mentioned in Scripture. There is nowhere in Scripture that says, “you shouldn’t feel like you have to obey God.” That is not in Scripture. Everywhere in the Bible – including the whole of the New Testament – teaches that we must have works, we must obey God, and we must be faithful.

Works are Required:

Scripture clearly teaches that we must have works. It is one of the biggest instructions found throughout the New Testament. No one taught that we are saved without works. The apostles all taught that works are required for salvation.

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:19

²⁸ Colossians 2:11

²⁹ Philippians 3:3

³⁰ Ref. Hebrews 9:9-12, 23:26, 10:1-4

³¹ Colossians 2:16-17

³² Matthew 7:12

³³ Romans 13:8,10

The clearest example is in the book of 1 John.

The letter of 1 John was written to address the lie that people don't have to obey God. It was written to say, "No – real Christians are those who obey God. Those who do not obey God are not real Christians."

Here are a few examples:

"We can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands. Anyone who says, 'I know God,' but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if someone obeys his word, then in that person God's love has truly reached its goal. This is how we can be sure we are in him: Whoever says that he abides in him must walk as he walked."³⁴

John said that we can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands.

Isn't that legalism?

The Church keeps telling us that legalism is a big problem that we should avoid – that we shouldn't feel like we must be doing certain things in order to have a right relationship with God.

Yet Scripture says the exact opposite. We can be sure that we know God if, and only if, we obey his commands.

John also said, "Anyone who claims, 'I am in the light,' but hates a brother or sister, is still in the darkness."³⁵

Again – according to John, if you don't have works (works of love), then you're not saved!

He said, "Do not love the world, or the things in the world. If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you... The world and its desires are passing away, but the person who does what God wants lives forever."³⁶

According to John, if you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you. But, if you do what God wants, you live forever.

If. You. Do. What. God. Wants.

Isn't that legalism?

John said, "Be sure you abide in what you heard from the beginning. If you abide in what you heard from the beginning, you will also abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise which he himself promised to us – eternal life."³⁷

If you abide in what you heard from the beginning, then you will abide in the Son and have eternal life. What does it mean to abide in what you heard from the beginning? John answered that question in the next chapter:

"This is the message you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other."³⁸

So, John said that if you abide in *what you heard from the beginning*, you will have eternal life. And he said that *the message you have heard from the beginning* is that we must all love one another. Therefore, John taught that if you love others, and you're living a life defined by love, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father, and you will have eternal life.

If you love each other, you will have eternal life.

Isn't that legalism?

Here's another one from John. This next one is important because John saw what was coming. He knew there would be people teaching lies. He knew people would say, "You don't need to obey God in order to be saved! You just need to believe! Obedience is legalism, and you don't want to be legalistic!"

³⁴ 1 John 2:3-6

³⁵ 1 John 2:9

³⁶ 1 John 2:15,17

³⁷ 1 John 2:24-25

³⁸ 1 John 3:11

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John knew false teachers would come, and he knew they would preach salvation without works. So, he said, “Dear children, do not let anyone deceive you. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as Christ is righteous. Anyone who continues to sin belongs to the devil, because the devil has been sinning since the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the devil’s work. All who are born of God do not continue sinning, because his seed abides in them. They are not able to go on sinning, because they have become children of God. So we can see who God’s children are and who the devil’s children are: Those who do not practice righteousness are not God’s children, and those who do not love their brothers and sisters are not God’s children.”³⁹

In this verse, John said, “do not let anyone deceive you.”

When the apostles said, “do not let anyone deceive you,” or “do not be deceived,” they were saying, “people are going to try to deceive you about this. People are going to try to convince you to believe the opposite of what I’m saying.”

John said, “do not let anyone deceive you. The one who does what is right is righteous...”

In other words, John was warning us that people would come along, trying to convince us that it is possible to be righteous without doing what is right. He was warning us ahead of time that this is a lie. Those people are deceivers. They are servants of Satan. They are leading people away from the truth. Only those who obey God are righteous. The person who does not obey God is not righteous.

His warning is exactly what has happened in the Church.

Today, the Church teaches what is called *imputed righteousness*. The idea of *imputed righteousness* is that, when God looks at us, he sees the righteous life of Jesus rather than our sin. Or, in other words, Jesus lived a righteous life – and now, it’s as if we were the ones who lived that life. Essentially, the doctrine of imputed righteousness is: you can be righteous without actually doing what is right.

That’s really dumbing it down, but that’s the basic idea.

With this doctrine of imputed righteousness, it effectively makes it irrelevant whether or not a person actually lives righteously or not. The Protestant Church teaches that a Christian is righteous entirely because of what Jesus did – and it has nothing to do with whether or not they themselves live righteously.

But that’s the opposite of what John said.

John said, “do not let anyone deceive you. The one who does what is right is righteous...” John warned us that people would come, teaching us that it’s possible to be righteous without doing what is right. He warned us that these people are false teachers. His warning is exactly what the Church teaches today, and millions believe it – even though John’s warning is right in front of them. Like the Israelites in the Old Testament, Christians were warned to not be deceived, but they’re blind to the fact that that warning was about them.

The idea of *imputed righteousness* is where Christians get the idea that we are “clothed with the righteousness of Christ.” That’s a phrase I’ve heard many times. It’s used in worship songs, Christians say it in prayer, pastors write about it in books.

But it’s not in the Bible.

The Bible never says we’re clothed with the righteousness of Christ. It’s not biblical. That phrase never once occurs in Scripture. No Christian is clothed in the righteousness of Christ. But – the Bible does tell us what Christians are wearing in God’s eyes. In the book of Revelation, John told us:

“Then I heard what sounded like a great many people, like the noise of many waters, and like the noise of loud thunder. The people were saying: ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him glory, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and the Lamb’s bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and pure, was given to her to wear.’ (The

³⁹ 1 John 3:7-10

fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.)”⁴⁰

John saw the bride of Christ – the Church. Every person in all of history who will receive salvation was standing before him, wearing pure white linen.

What were they wearing?

Was it the righteousness of Christ?

No! They weren’t clothed in the righteousness of Christ! They were clothed in the righteous deeds of the saints! We are the saints! We are clothed in our own righteous deeds! We are clothed in our own righteousness! As John said in his letter, “the one who does what is right is righteous.”⁴¹ Those who obey God are righteous – they’re clothed in their own righteousness. Obedience is essential. You cannot be righteous without obeying God.

As Paul said, “[Jesus] gave himself for us so he might pay the price to free us from all wickedness and to make us pure people who belong only to him – people who are always wanting to do good deeds.”⁴²

The Church doesn’t preach the full gospel! Jesus didn’t just come to grant us forgiveness – he came to set us free from wickedness, and to make us people who want to do good deeds – people who want to live a righteous life. Therefore, on judgment day – on the day of the marriage of the Lamb – we will be clothed in our own righteous deeds. We will be clothed in righteousness because we will have lived a righteous life, obeying the commands of God.

Righteous works are required! Righteous works are part of faith – part of fidelity, loyalty, and reliability.

The Bible is clear: on judgment day, you will give an account for your *actions* – not your *beliefs*. When John saw a vision of judgment day, he said, “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne. Then books were opened, and another book, which is the book of life was opened. The dead were judged by what they had done, which was recorded in the books... Each person was judged by what he had done.”⁴³

On judgment day, the books will be opened, and the dead will be judged by what they had done. They won’t be judged by what they believed. They won’t be judged by who they trusted. They won’t be judged by what information they accepted as true. They will be judged by what they had done. They will be judged by their actions. They will be judged by their works.

Jesus said the same thing in the parable of the sheep and the goats, and in many other parables.⁴⁴ Judgment day will be a day where the righteous are separated from the unrighteous based on how they lived. They will be separated based on their works – not their beliefs.

John also said, “...we can be without fear on the day of judgment because...”

What would the Church say there?

“Because we believe in Jesus. Because Jesus died for our sins. Because we trusted Jesus. Because Jesus did everything for us.”

But that’s not what John said. John said, “...we can be without fear on the day of judgment because in this world we are like him.”⁴⁵

The only ones who can be without fear on the day of judgment are those who lived like Jesus

⁴⁰ Revelation 19:6-8

⁴¹ 1 John 3:7

⁴² Titus 2:14

⁴³ Revelation 20:12-13

⁴⁴ Ref. Matthew 7:24-27, 13:47-50, 24:42-51, 25:31-46; Luke 12:16-21, 16:19-31

⁴⁵ 1 John 4:17

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in this life. We can be without fear on the day of judgment if we obeyed God in our lives – following Jesus and living in loyalty, fidelity, and faithfulness. We can be without fear if we were reliable and lived the kind of life God wants. We can be without fear if we are children of God – people who inherited God’s nature and lived truly good and holy lives.

Jesus gave his life to make us people who want to obey him – who want to live our lives doing good deeds to meet urgent needs. He ransomed us to make us people who obey him – not out of law, but out of love.

That’s what Paul was getting at – our works are not a list of rules we have to follow. Our works are when we obey out of love. When we live our lives thinking, “Man, I love him! And because I love him, I’m going to obey him. I’m going to do what he wants, I’m going to do what he likes!”

John said, “Loving God means obeying his commands. And God’s commands are not too burdensome for us.”⁴⁶

Loving God means obeying his commands! And, no – his commands are *not impossible* for us to obey. Don’t let anyone convince you otherwise.

Jesus said the same thing – he said it three times in just a few verses:

“If you love me, you will obey my commands.”⁴⁷

“Those who have my commands and obey them are the ones who love me...”⁴⁸

“If people love me, they will obey my teaching.”⁴⁹

Loving God means we obey him. If you say you love God, but you don’t obey him, you’re a liar – you don’t love him. What other relationship in your life would you say you love someone, but everything you do is something they hate, and you’re doing it anyway, and you don’t care that they hate it?

That’s not love.

Love isn’t a feeling. It’s not just saying, “I love God in my heart.” It’s not just affection.

Love is action. Loving God means obeying his commands.

So, to conclude, legalism is not something Christians need to be worried about. Legalism is not a biblical topic. It is not something the Bible tells you to be worried about. It’s something that men have made up to support their theology that says you’re saved by belief, not by fidelity.

Scripture says you’re saved by fidelity. That’s what the Greek word means. So, let’s stop talking about legalism; let’s stop bringing this up as an argument for why we don’t need to obey God. If you go through life saying, “I don’t need to obey God,” he will tell you, “I never knew you. Depart from me, you who practice unrighteousness.”⁵⁰

Christians keep bringing up legalism as an objection to the idea that we must obey God in order to be saved. But legalism isn’t in the Bible! It’s not biblical! It is a man-made tradition. Just like the Pharisees, we neglect the commands of God for the sake of our own traditions. We look at the things Jesus said we should be doing, and we say, “I don’t need to do that because that would be legalism.”

Legalism isn’t in the Bible. Jesus never warned about legalism. Paul never warned against legalism. The apostles and Jesus all taught the opposite. They warned about lawlessness. They warned

⁴⁶ 1 John 5:3

⁴⁷ John 14:15

⁴⁸ John 14:21

⁴⁹ John 14:23

⁵⁰ Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

about being unfaithful. They warned about being deceived by people who would tell us that we don't have to obey God to be righteous.

We are expected to obey the commands of God. We shouldn't be concerned about legalism when we're talking about things the Bible directly tells us to do.

We are expected to obey God. We are expected to do what Jesus taught. To do that, we must make sure that the commands we obey are the things Jesus actually taught. The only way to know for sure is to read his words for ourselves, paying attention to what he said our lives should look like.

We need to make sure we're following what Jesus taught, and we need to stop thinking that it's important for us to feel like we don't have to.

Because we do have to.

Scripture teaches that you do have to follow him. You do have to obey him. That's why he said he will turn people away who call him Lord if they practiced unrighteousness.⁵¹ If you practice unrighteousness – if you're living a life that's not obedient to what Jesus taught – you will be turned away. Legalism is not something you should be worried about. If you are following the commands of God, you are doing right.

No one in the Bible was rebuked for trying to obey God too hard.

The teachers who warn us about legalism are like the Pharisees, and Jesus told the Pharisees, "You travel across land and sea to make one convert. When you make that convert, you make him twice the son of hell that you are."⁵²

That's what is happening in the Church. People are being taught that they should not feel an obligation to obey God. They are being taught that they can be saved without obeying God. They are being taught that they can have eternal life without living righteously. They are being taught that they're clothed in the righteousness of Jesus, instead of their own righteousness.

Christians are traveling across land and sea to make converts – but they're converting people to follow their human traditions and their human teaching. They're not converting them to live righteous lives and obey God out of fidelity, loyalty and faithfulness.

Now, as I said at the beginning of this video, there are two objections Christians tend to bring up. This was one of them: legalism. In the next video, I'll address the second objection that people tend to bring up, and then we'll move on to talk about what it actually means to obey the commands of Jesus. Because the only kind of "legalism" that might be an issue is if the commands you're obeying are only human commands, man-made traditions, and made-up rules. As Jesus told the Pharisees, "you rejected what God said for the sake of your own tradition."⁵³

This does happen. There are people who come along and say, "You have to do this, and you have to do that." But they aren't teaching the same commands that Jesus taught. They're teaching commands that men have made up. When you start feeling like you have to follow all of those rules and traditions, you could call that legalism, and that is something we want to avoid. So, we want to be able to distinguish between what Jesus wants us to be doing versus what men have brought in and turned into religion. So, in the next video we'll talk about the second objection that Christians tend to bring, and then in the video after that, we'll talk about what it means to obey Jesus and not human traditions.

⁵¹ Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

⁵² Matthew 23:15

⁵³ Matthew 15:6