

# Religious Legalism Distorts Grace

[Hosea 14:9a](#); [Rom.3:19, 20](#) “*BE WISE – UNDERSTAND*”

God's plan is a Grace plan. God the Father does the work, man receives the benefit. God receives the glory for His own works; man receives no glory.

The greatest distortion to Grace is religious legalism.

Religion and legalism are Satan's Ace and King of trump, the primary means by which he *"blinds the minds of those who seek Christ"* and which are included in [Eph. 4:14](#) as part of *"...every wind of doctrine, slight of men, cunning craftiness, by which they lie in wait to deceive."* By these means, Satan tries to disrupt the plan of God and blind people to grace principles.

I use the word "religion" in a strict sense here, not in the general sense of "the service or worship of God." In the general sense, of course, Christianity could be viewed as a religion. But most religion is legalistic, and I want to distinguish the Christian way of life from other religious practice. So the definition I use is:

**Religion is any system in which man, by his own efforts, tries to earn the approval of God.**

Furthermore, the definition for legalism in this message has to do with religious legalism, so:

**Legalism is a religious system that teaches that a person can do something to earn or merit salvation or blessing from God.**

The purpose of this message is to help you identify religious legalism in all of its forms. These thoughts will define and illustrate the concept of legalism, and show how to distinguish legalism from grace thinking and activities. There are also numerous references to Bible teaching on legalism, particularly from the Epistle to the Galatians, where the Jews had a very difficult time reconciling Law and Grace.

## Religious Legalism Distorts Grace (Continued)

It is very important that we understand the doctrine of Grace also. Grace is an extensive Bible category. The majority of the blessings and privileges of the Christian life depend on knowing and using Grace Principles. So it's vital that we master the subject.

To understand these concepts clearly, you should also study some of the other topics which are related to legalism, especially Grace.

Some other categorical studies are: The Barrier; Circumcision; Confession of Sin; Grace; Judgment, Justice, and Judging; Satan; Spirituality.

### **Defining Legalism**

The standard (Webster's New Collegiate) definition for legalism is: ***strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code.***

This definition does not seem very clear. What is, after all, "excessive" conformity to the law? I suppose it would be excessive to insist on driving 55 mph on the Interstate when people are stacked up behind you wanting to go 70. Legalism on the highway is sometimes dangerous.

But, strict obedience to God's laws is not wrong. In fact, failure to obey is sin. Also, you can certainly decide to set a high standard for yourself in some area, based on your understanding of the obligations of the Christian life. This is not wrong, and it is not legalism (by our previous definition of religious legalism), even though it might be strict conformance. (It is legalism, however, to think that by maintaining high standards you are somehow doing something to merit salvation or to earn blessings or rewards.)

## Religious Legalism Distorts Grace (Continued)

For example, your view of the moral code of [Rom. 14:21](#) may lead you to adopt abstinence from alcohol as a standard, out of your regard for weaker brethren who might be caused to stumble. This would certainly be a strict and legal conformity; but it's not legalism, because you are not trying to earn points with God by your actions. Someone else may consider this excessive, but it's none of their business. It is not wrong for you to set high standards for yourself, and neither is it religious legalism. In fact, quite often what a grace believer calls legalistic is really someone else's setting high standards for himself.

A stricter general definition of legalism is found in the Oxford English Dictionary: ***The principles of those who hold a theological position of adhering to the law as opposed to the Gospel; the doctrine of Justification by works, or teaching which savors of that doctrine.***

[Romans 4:4,5](#) states the case succinctly, ***"Now to him that works is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt; but to him that works not, but believes on Him that justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."***

And [Romans 11:6](#) is clear, **"And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work."**

Our human system of work and reward is like this: I work for you and you pay me. This is obviously legitimate; it's the way commerce works under divine institutions and free enterprise.

But the religious legalist is convinced that God works by the same system – or at least he hopes so. He says: I work for God and God rewards me by saving me and blessing me in some way.

That's not how God operates. He has no need or desire for our works; in fact, our works are offensive to Him. [Isaiah 64:6](#), ***"All our righteous deeds are as filthy rags..."*** If I try to impress God with my works, He discards them as filthy rags.

## Religious Legalism Distorts Grace (Continued)

That's why we say that religious legalism, which tries to promote a works approach to God, is a "system that teaches that a person can do something to earn or merit salvation or blessing from God."

The word "legalism" also refers to any merit system which operates by works, by which a person tries to please God, or to assist God, or to glorify God by human power.

Religious legalism also refers to any system of religious bondage imposed on someone by another individual, or by an organization, that attempts to make that person a practitioner of legalism. Bullying tactics are often used: "Unless you accept our point of view, you are not one of us!" Ostracism is a very powerful persuader of novice Christians.

So, while it is not legalism to have high standards, it is legalism to try to impose those standards on others as a system of spirituality.

The word "grace," however, is used in the Bible to refer to all that God is free to do for mankind because of the work that has already been performed for us by the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. Grace means that man has received from God that which he has not earned or deserved. Nothing that we are, and nothing that we can do, is enough to qualify us for anything that the Lord has to give us. In fact, our works cause us to be arrogant in the presence of God, something He *will not tolerate*.