

## LEGALISM AND LUST<sup>8</sup>

When my friends and I drafted our contract, we had some good motivations behind our guidelines. But we were pursuing holiness divorced from an understanding of what Jesus had accomplished for us.

This is the essence of legalism. Often we think of legalism as applying the wrong set of rules. But that's not necessarily true. Legalism is using any set of rules—bad rules, good rules, even God's laws—in a wrong way. In his book *The Cross Centered Life*, C. J. Mahaney writes, "Legalism is seeking to achieve forgiveness from God and acceptance by God through my obedience to God."

Legalism is trying to add to what Jesus did when He died and rose again. Legalism is seeking to relate to God based on our work, instead of based on the work of our representative and mediator, Jesus Christ.

Christ died to set us free from the tyranny of all our human contracts, which seek to make us righteous before Him. The law, and our obedience of it, could

never make us righteous. It only reveals how sinful we are and how incapable of changing by ourselves. The law is a huge signpost pointing out the fact that we need a Savior.

Please don't base your battle against lust on legalism. It never works. You'll either become hopelessly disillusioned at your failure, or if you succeed, you'll become puffed up with self-righteous pride. Your legalism might appear to produce results for a while, but ultimately it will work against your pursuit of holiness.

If you were to use the practical ideas I'm about to share with you as a legalistic set of guidelines, not only would it be displeasing to God, but you wouldn't change. Your behavior might change for a while, but your heart wouldn't change.

You'd crash and burn. It would all be drudgery. You'd start looking for ways to circumvent your own rules. Holiness would seem dry and boring and lifeless. And sin would become more enticing and even more powerful.

That isn't the life Christ died to give you. "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free," Paul writes. "Stand firm, then, and

do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

## TWO IMPORTANT WORDS

An important part of standing firm in the gospel and avoiding legalism is understanding the difference between the work *Christ* accomplished to save us and the work of becoming holy that He enables us to participate in after we've been saved. Theologians assign the terms *justification* and *sanctification* to these two closely related but different concepts.

C. J. Mahaney gives the following definition of each:

- *Justification* refers to your status before God. When you placed your faith in Jesus, God the judge handed down the verdict that you are righteous. He transferred the perfect sinless record of Jesus to you. God completely and totally forgave you. He not only wiped away the record of your sin; He credited the righteousness of His Son to you.