

Persistent and Deadly “ISMS” - Legalism

“We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.” (Galatians 2:16, ESV)

This month let us examine another persistent and deadly “ism” - *legalism*. While the word legalism is defined and applied in numerous ways, I wish to look at legalism as the false teaching that human beings can earn God’s favor by their obedience to God’s Law (His Ten Commandments). For even though the Lord commands us to obey Him, yet our obedience to His Law cannot overcome the guilt of the sin that separates us from Him. We cannot please Him or attain life through His Law. *“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20, ESV).*

But the Jewish teachers in Jesus’ day (and today) said that salvation comes through obedience to God’s Word. In fact, the law as a means of salvation is expressed in one way or another in every man-made religion – even religions that do not confess belief in the Holy Bible. For *“the requirements of the law are written on [human] hearts” (Romans 2:15, NIV)*. But see, *“if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law” (Galatians 3:21, ESV)*. But it isn’t because this is not the function that God has given to His Law. Therefore, *“all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them’” (Galatians 3:10, ESV)*. For in using Deuteronomy 27:26 in the verse I quoted in the previous sentence, the Apostle Paul told the Galatians (and us) that we are under judgment if we fail to completely keep God’s Law. And every person fails to faithfully obey – *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23, ESV)*.

Thanks be to God that *“now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith” (Romans 3:21-25a, NIV)*. Therefore, *“we conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law” (Romans 3:28, Evangelical Heritage Version)*. No wonder Martin Luther was so overjoyed by St. Paul’s words: *“The righteous shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17, ESV)*.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, *“we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”* For legalism seeks to put the Law and our obedience in the front seat, and Jesus and the Good News of His obedient life and sacrificial suffering, death, and resurrection in the back seat. Therefore, we reject legalism – the teaching that we can earn God’s acceptance and salvation by our obedience to His demands. *“So are we doing away with the law by this faith? Absolutely not! Instead, we are upholding the law” (Romans 3:31, Evangelical Heritage Version)*. For Jesus fulfilled the Law for us. Jesus Christ, God Himself in our human flesh, perfectly kept all of

God's commands and requirements for us in our place. And He sacrificed His life into death to pay for all your disobedience and mine – bodily rising again in victory three days later.

So, what should be the Christian's attitude toward God's Law? Well, recall from catechism class that the Law has three purposes/uses. The Law serves as a *curb* (to discourage human sinning), a *mirror* (that shows us our sin) and a *guide* (telling us how God would have us now live our lives in this world). We are to keep God's Law in its proper perspective. We see the Law as God's holy will. But we don't see God's Law as that which gives, secures, or sustains our life with God. We obey God's Commandments because He tells us to do so - not because doing so merits forgiveness, salvation, or everlasting life (these are free gifts earned for us by Jesus, given to us through His Word & Sacraments, and received through His gift of faith).

My fellow saints, legalism will always tempt us as we journey through this life. Why? Because our sinful nature curves us inward toward ourselves – including our own efforts. Therefore, we will always be tempted to think that we ought to do something to ensure God's love for us. But we cannot do so by our efforts. Yet, we need the Law on this side of heaven because we remain sinners. And we have no right to break God's Law. God tells us to obey His Commandments – yet, we can't merit heaven by doing so. Interestingly enough, we are now free to keep the Law – not under compulsion as slaves, but as those who have been rescued and made God's children forever. So, we acknowledge both God's Law and His Gospel as doctrines of His Word. But we distinguish between them properly – understanding the Biblical function and scope of both of these teachings, and always being mindful that legalism will constantly be at work to challenge right teaching and threaten the hope that we have in Jesus.

So, this month (and every day) may we joyfully confess that we are saved by “grace alone” through “faith alone” in “Christ alone” – all of which is revealed in “Scripture alone.” Thanks be to Jesus who frees us from legalism.

Wishing You a Blessed Reformation Day,
Pastor