

THE CURSE OF LEGALISM IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

By Deborah V. Flores

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Many Christians today have been indoctrinated with legalistic teachings and interpretations of the scriptures by churches of various denominations. For example, there are churches that forbid women to wear any jewelry or makeup. Many churches insist that one, and only one translation of the bible is accurate and therefore able to bring about salvation for those who embrace it. Some churches condone a specific diet and forbid the eating of certain foods. There are churches that insist that only those who worship on a particular day of the week are true followers of Christ. Many churches forbid women to share or teach in the church. Additionally, there are churches that teach a doctrine of works in order to obtain or maintain salvation, and so on. They apply the letter of the law, typically taken out of context, and in the process, totally ignore the spirit of the law that Jesus taught and lived by. By so doing they place an oppressive yoke of bondage on the people of God who, in reality, are called to freedom in Christ! Even worse, by imposing their rules and regulations, they risk turning away unbelievers who are seeking God. The curse of the Pharisees has translated from Judaism to Christianity, in spite of the fact that Christians are well aware that Jesus condemned the legalism of the Pharisees. I believe that the most damaging of all legalistic interpretations of the scriptures has to do with Paul's admonition that wives submit to their husbands.

Many people fail to take into account the whole context of Paul's teaching to the churches of Ephesus (Ephesians 5) and Colosse (Colossians 3) as well as the affirmation with which Jesus treated women. They believe and teach that Paul's admonition that wives submit to their husbands means that a wife must obey and submit to anything and everything a husband may demand or dish out. As one commentator put it, "It seems that even the church has an erroneous view about how to love your wife. Love your wife as Christ loved the church is the proper way, yet very few men understand this concept. With religion, most men want to dominate their wife with the Word only for their benefit. Men today normally shout, "submit to me and be a silent woman" and this is what they think a good wife is. However, if we are imitating Christ's marriage, we have to remember that He has never treated us in a harsh manner. Where do we get off treating our spouse in such a harsh manner?" This is an example of religious legalism that is not rooted in the Spirit of Truth. It is a very twisted interpretation directly influenced by our evil adversary with the purpose of keeping people in generational cycles of bondage. The Spirit of legalism casts a death shroud over those who cling to it and who in turn attempt to cast the same shroud over others in a mistaken effort to "help" or to reform them. Jesus came to set captives FREE from bondage, He came to give us abundant life! Legalism, therefore, has no place in true Christianity.

Those who embrace and espouse legalism are practicing a form of religious addiction devoid of the spirit and power of God. Why would anyone who has received the gift of God through Jesus be drawn to such an oppressive religious viewpoint? Perhaps they don't realize the degree to which they have been set free. Perhaps they find holding to legalism easier than walking by the Spirit. Perhaps it provides a sense of self-satisfaction and well-being. Perhaps they are sincerely convinced they are pleasing the Lord. Upon closer examination, could it be they are simply pleasing themselves? While these legalistic beliefs and patterns of behavior may appear pious and having a form of godliness, they are nothing more than a deception that offers a false sense of security and control, and a pretense of order and perfection. Real life, including the Christian life, can be messy. It does not happen inside a nice neat box held together by cords of legalism, as some would like to believe. People who try to live this way are deceiving themselves and are really living under a burden of bondage—the very bondage from which Christ died to set them free! In Luke 4:18, Jesus professed, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon

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me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.” Therefore, telling a woman she must bear, in the name of Godly submission, the abuses of a rebellious husband, who is acting out of dysfunctional patterns of addictive behavior or mental illness (anger, control, physical and emotional harm, alcoholism, infidelity, drug addiction, etc.), is an insult to the very integrity of God Himself. To put up with such treatment and behavior is not an act of Christian love and obedience, but rather a cowardly act of enablement. True love is tough love. Doctor James Dobson explains this beautifully in his book “Love Must Be Tough.” Tough love is respectfully courageous in speaking forth and upholding truth. It draws boundaries when necessary and sticks by them, trusting the consequences to the Lord. Tough love is the kind of love God has for us, and He offers us the power and support to walk out this kind of love as well. Tough love does not ignore, submit to or enable dysfunctional behavior, but rather lays down boundaries with consequences. Tough love is the only hope for breaking a toxic relationship dynamic and subsequently winning over a wayward spouse.

While there are biblical guiding principles, there are no nice, neat legalistic prescriptions for what those boundaries should look like. One must be personally guided by God’s Spirit and follow His directions which are very personal for each unique situation. God’s purpose, however, is always the same—to bring to repentance, to bind up wounds and set captives free so they may enjoy the intimacy of relationship with Him, and the abundant life made available through Christ’s radical sacrificial love for us. Jesus paid the price for our redemption from sin. He freed us from condemnation under the Law, while also providing us with the ability to walk out *His* righteousness through the power and personal ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives! The church must stop placing yokes of burden upon the shoulders of God’s people. All the confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees related to the legalism they imposed on the people. Ironically, they too failed to meet the standard of perfection demanded by God. We must all learn to rightly divide (discern) the Word of Truth so that we might live the life that Christ’s death made possible for us. If you feel that you are under a weight of bondage, know that you are not walking in God’s truth. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” (John 8:32b)