

The Essence of Legalism: Bewitched and Bedazzled

Dr. Harold L Senkbeil, Teacher of Mission and Pastoral Theology
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA
SenkbeilHL@mail.ctsfw.edu

One of the devil's most enticing and captivating temptations for serious-minded Christians lies not in the alluring seductions of the sinful world, but much closer to home. He is able to use godliness itself as a cover under which he works overtime to remove confidence in Christ's atoning work as the sole root and foundation of salvation.

It's a trick as old as the Bible itself. Ever since Satan first posed the question to Eve, the mother of all humanity, he delights in planting the same doubt in the minds and hearts of all of Eve's daughters and sons: "Hath God said?" It's the old "Yes, but..." ploy.

- Yes, of course God forbids sin. But doesn't He also want you to be happy?
- Yes, of course marriage is a divine institution. But aren't there many definitions of marriage?
- Yes, of course Jesus Christ is God's only begotten Son. But aren't there also many roads to salvation?

You know the arguments; they swirl all around the discerning contemporary Christian. We're alert to the devil's accustomed strategy: he uses half-truths to destroy the truth. We can usually detect his attacks on the Law of God a mile away.

But how about those times when he uses that very Law against God Himself? You see, when Christian virtue begins to overshadow the preaching of Christ crucified for sinners (1 Corinthians 1:23-25), then the cross is robbed of its power. That's exactly what happens when Christians are pointed to their own godly life rather than to Jesus as the source of their salvation.

Morality and godliness are fine Christian virtues, both demanded and expected of God's people. Yet when they become the sole barometer and litmus test of faith, they obscure the gospel of full and free salvation which God has planned and procured through His Son Jesus Christ.

It's one of the devil's favorite tricks among Christians; when he cannot seduce them into unbelief, he drowns them in their own religiosity. It's a tactic rampant in our time. Take a look at the profusion of "how to" books and tapes on the Christian market, for example. There seems to be a spiritual plan for everything from Christian dieting ("What would Jesus eat?") to Christian finances ("Jesus wants you rich"). Now don't get me wrong: I'm not suggesting that Christians should disregard God's will and way when it comes to daily living. And there's certainly much to be said for godly restraint in eating habits and faithful management of earthly possessions. These things become problematic, however, when they become the central focus of a Christian's life and hope.

This is the problem St. Paul warned the Christians in Galatia against: "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? ...Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" (Galatians 3:1-2, ESV) Here again, the apostle wasn't undermining the place of

God's Law in the Christian life. He simply argued that it should be kept in its place. The Law has one central purpose for God's people: it brings them to Christ.

Now, before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (Galatians 3:23-27)

When the commands and requirements of the law are the functional root of our relationship to God, we become enemies of the cross of Christ, where the everlasting Father paid for the sins of the whole world in the incarnate flesh and blood of His own Son. Worse than that, we begin to substitute our own spirituality and godliness for Christ himself as the sole source of our forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation.

Spirituality and godliness are poor substitutes for Christ. Our personal spirituality can never atone for sin, and human godliness is not the source and power for the renewed life of Christian service. St. Paul points out the futility of that sort of well-intentioned, but misguided conviction in his letter to the Colossians:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and promoting asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:20-23)

How, then, can a Christian make progress against the inroads of sin in his life? The answer is as old as the first gospel preaching (Matthew 4:17): *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*. Wherever Jesus Christ and Him crucified is preached, there the kingdom of heaven draws near to all who hear – there Jesus Christ Himself is present (Matthew 28:20) to forgive sins and to exchange his own eternal life for the death that plagues all of fallen humanity. Such preaching both calls for and bestows genuine repentance, that is, *turning* – a mind and heart made new in Christ. For since we have been baptized into Christ, we have actually put on Christ. (Galatians 3:27) This new life is so radically different from our old way of life that the Christian can indeed say with the apostle: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

Rules and regulations can be dazzling in a confused and chaotic world. But they have a way of bewitching Christians to switch allegiance from Christ and His saving cross to their own puny efforts to fulfill the law. Much better to stick with the Lord who bought us with His blood and made us to be a kingdom – priests to serve His God and Father. To Him alone be all glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Revelation 1:6)