

Jesus Christ - Our Way of Holiness

"You are in Christ Jesus whom God made to be our ... holiness." 1 Corinthians 1:30

The Bible commands us to "pursue... holiness, for without holiness no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14)." However, most Christians who pursue holiness lack a Biblical knowledge of how to practice holiness. There are two extremes that every Christian should avoid in trying to practice holiness: legalism and licentiousness. Legalism is the attempt to please God by your own works rather than relying by faith solely on what Christ accomplished on the cross. Legalism produces an outwardly "moral" behavior, instead of a heart that has been inwardly and authentically transformed by faith. Since legalism is performance-based and not faith-based, it is only natural that when you perform well (according to your standard of holiness) you will feel good, but when you perform poorly, you will feel bad. It is also natural that you will feel resentful towards other Christians who are not trying as hard according to your standard of holiness. Legalism means you must do something to obtain God's righteousness, whereas grace means God did something to impute righteousness to you, which you then receive by faith. Therefore, God's righteousness (based on grace) depends on your faith in Christ's completed work on the cross; whereas man's righteousness (based on legalism) depends on your natural willpower and self-effort. Legalism and grace are mutually exclusive. If you are practicing legalism, you are not under grace. Paul warned, "Are you so foolish? After beginning by the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by your human effort?... You have been severed from Christ... you have fallen from grace (Galatians 3:3; 5:4)." Legalism is the erroneous belief that if you follow religious rules and regulations, you will be righteous in God's eyes. Paul warned believers against the futility of religious legalism: "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of the world... why do you submit to its rules?... Such practices have the appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed religion, false humility and ascetic discipline, but

they have no value in restraining sinful desires (Colossians 2:20-23)." For example, legalism is the false belief that if you follow certain rules (such as attending church twice a week and tithing ten percent of your income to the church), you will be righteous in God's eyes. Or, legalism is trying your best to be holy by following Christian disciplines, such as Bible reading, witnessing, prayer and fasting, and acts of service. Thus, legalism is the religion of "always trying harder." Ultimately, the root of legalism is self-righteousness. It is the sin of pride to think you have the moral ability to live a holy Christian life, whereas other Christians who cannot are inferior. When Christians become "burnt-out" from legalism, they often fall into the second extreme: licentiousness. Licentiousness is a lack of godly self-control, which leads to unrestrained worldly excess. The word licentiousness is derived from the same Greek root word for license. In other words, licentiousness misuses God's grace as a license to practice sin. As Paul warned, "Do not use your freedom as a license to gratify sinful desires... for the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, training us to deny ungodliness and worldly passions and to live sober-minded, upright and godly lives in this present age (Galatians 5:13; Titus 2:11-12)." The Bible uses the term "dissipation" to describe the fruit of licentiousness (Luke 21:34; 1 Peter 4:3-4). From a Biblical perspective, dissipation means wasting your life on worthless worldly things (such as accumulating riches and indulging in sinful, sensual pleasures). Christians who practice licentiousness usually have a wrong concept of grace. They believe that God's grace covers all their present and future sinful actions, even if they live a life of unrepentant lawlessness. This is "cheap grace," which is not God's grace at all! The Bible warns us to beware of "ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness (Jude 4)." The problem of legalism and licentiousness is not new. Back in the first century, the Galatians fell into legalism and the Corinthians fell into licentiousness. Both churches had to be exhorted to turn back to the straight and narrow way of holiness in Christ. Now that we have examined

the problem of legalism and licentiousness, let us look at God's remedy for dealing with the true root of our dilemma, which is sin-sickness. The only antidote for sin-sickness is the cross of Christ. According to the gospel, Christ not only died to free us from the *penalty* of sin by forgiving our sins; He also died to free us from the *power* of sin by removing our sin nature (Ephesians 1:7; Romans 6:6). After we are saved by faith in God's grace, we must be careful to avoid the extremes of either legalism or licentiousness as we pursue Christ's way of holiness. Whenever we step out of faith in the cross of Christ and enter into our own self-effort, we take the burden for our sanctification out of God's hands and put it in our own hands. This act of unbelief prevents God from doing the sanctifying work of the Spirit in us that comes only from believing and acting on the divine truth that we no longer have a sinful nature and Christ now lives in us (Galatians 2:20). Whenever we find we have lost the joy of the Lord, it is a red flag that we have stepped out of this place of faith. Whenever we find ourselves overcome by sin, it is a sure sign we have forgotten the freedom from sin that we possess in Christ. Whenever we are overwhelmed by a sense of failure, it reveals we are trying to be holy in our own strength instead of fixing our eyes on Jesus and abiding in Him. Whether we come under the unbearable yoke of legalism or the ungodly yoke of licentiousness, it is because we have stepped out of the yoke of faith in Christ (Matthew 11:28-30). Christ's yoke of discipleship is easy when we are living by faith. For where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty and mercy; not legalism and carnal severity (2 Corinthians 3:17). What should we do if we stray from the way of holiness in Christ and wander down the wrong path of legalism or licentiousness? There is no condemnation in Christ. We turn around (repent), ask God to restore the joy of our salvation, and fix our eyes back on Jesus. If we abide in Christ, He will abide in us. Then we will walk in His holiness and not fall into either legalism or licentiousness.

"For the kingdom of God is... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Romans 14:17