

When Religious Legalism Leads to Abuse

BY BARBARA CHANDLER



"These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men" (Isaiah 29:13).

Religious legalism involves holding a theological position of adhering to the law as opposed to the gospel. Religious legalism invariably leads to beliefs and practices of justification by works—or performance-based religion.

At the time of Jesus, there were some 613 separate rules by which devout Jews were expected to live. These laws include restrictions about: Mating different kinds of animals, planting a field with two kinds of seed, wearing clothing woven of two kinds of material (Leviticus 19:19).

Legalism had its beginnings in the first century with members of a Jewish group who were called Pharisees. They sought distinction and praise by observance of external rites and by forms of piety, such as ceremonial washings, fasting, prayers and alms-giving. The Pharisees set themselves apart, from the Romans and other Gentiles, who they thought could make them unclean in the eyes of God by eating with them or touching them.

By their strict adherence to the law, the Pharisees failed to see what mattered most to God. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for being so wrapped up in the law.

Jesus told them they were so busy following rules that they neglected the important matters,

such as; justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23).

Today, both Christian and Jewish people who hold to the letter of the law and set up all kinds of rules and regulations by which to live run the risk of falling into idolatry by placing more emphasis on living the law than having faith in God. "When the laws become all important, religious legalism can lead to idolatry," explains Reverend Canon Grant Carey, Trinity Episcopal Cathedral. "Saint Paul, who was trained in interpreting the Hebrew Law, had an issue with people who strictly adhered to the Law. Paul came to see that the Law was good, but also that it could be abused when it became an end in itself" (Romans 2:13). Legalism detracts from what Jesus has done for us on the cross and can lead to spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abuse often happens when people distort what God has written and generalize their own made-up rules and regulations from Bible verses and use these restrictions as a means of power or control to regulate behavior.

Those who become involved with spiritual abuse exhibit some of the same psychological symptoms exhibited by victims of sexual abuse. A major symptom is the inability to form healthy relationships because of the betrayal of trust.

People place a high level of trust in spiritual leaders. It's expected that the trust will be honored and

guarded. When this trust is violated the wound is very deep. Sometimes the wound is so deep that the wounded person cannot trust any spiritual authority again.

In addition to not being able to trust spiritual authorities, the spiritually abused person may also find it difficult to trust God. "How could—or why did—God let this happen to me?" This anger, if not properly dealt with, can lead to bitterness and cynicism toward everything spiritual.

Recovery from spiritual abuse needs to begin with understanding about what happened. A victim usually thinks he or she is the only one experiencing these problems. Being able to identify and define the problem starts the healing process.

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The abused person also needs to learn about the true nature of God's grace, love and forgiveness. "Jesus was aware that legalism can cause one to experience guilt in situations where such feelings are not warranted; he offered forgiveness—extending forgiveness even for those who had nailed him to the cross," explains Reverend Carey. "His action made it clear to his followers that love triumphs over Law." □

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