



# YOKE OF LEGALISM

All across North America, people are being robbed, but the thief will never be prosecuted in a court of law. This thief goes by the name of *legalism*, and he's very subtle. So subtle in fact, it is often years down the road before anyone realizes how much was stolen.

Peace is usually the first thing the thief takes. He replaces peace with fear, a fear born out of the misconception of not measuring up in God's eyes.

Joy is next to go. The joy of salvation is replaced with a yoke of law—rules and regulations governing every possible area of life.

In the dictionary, *legalism* is defined as "strict, literal adherence to the law or a particular code." But what the definition doesn't mention are the casualties legalism leaves in its wake.

## Julia's Journey

Julia Martin is one such casualty. While she speaks of the years she spent in the yoke of legalism, pain laces her voice as she remembers the bondage. Before getting involved in legalism, she and her family had been out of church for five years. Because of that, Julia says, "I was broken inside and unhappy. I didn't go the way of the world, but I was empty."

In 1983, she and her family began to attend

church again, seeking a place to grow in Christ. Julia was eager to serve the Lord. Unknown to them, this church was steeped in legalism. Julia picked up a heavy yoke that year, and it would take ten years and a brush with death before she would lay it down.

Why is it some people are more susceptible to legalism's yoke than others? Though anyone can fall under the bondage of legalism, some are easier prey, such as people with poor self-image or those who've had chaotic childhoods. Living under a strict set of rules

creates a feeling of order in a life where there has been little or none. Legalism is a way of working to earn God's favor, appealing to our humanistic side.

During the time she became yoked with legalism, Julia says, "I had a poor self image. My husband had left me for another woman, and my children ran wild. I had no education; I'm not good at anything. I've never been attractive. I had nothing going for me. Then legalism came along and patted me on the head for my performance, so I began to really jump through the hoops."

Every time the church doors opened, Julia was present. She taught Sunday school and started a bus route. The harder she worked, the more that was expected of her. Even as her marriage crumbled, she was advised by the pastor to "do more for the church."

The performance-based religion took a toll on her own children—promiscuity—drugs. There is no doubt in Julia's mind that being yoked with legalism contributed to the misbehavior of her children. They couldn't live up to her expectations. "They rebelled against being forced to conform to something they couldn't measure up to. As a parent in that legalistic background, I didn't give them the unconditional love they needed. I was too hard on them—on

their sin—when God is so merciful with ours."

Being involved with legalism gave Julia a skewed picture of God. She felt that "God is up there, just waiting for me to do wrong so he can hit me over the head. But now, I'm finding out that God loves me no matter what. He hates the sin in my life, but he loves me and they [legalists] don't teach that."

For Julia, getting out of legalism was terrible. "I didn't realize it had such a hold on me." In 1993, she almost hemorrhaged to death. Her family gathered around her hospital bed and begged her to get out of the legalistic church she was attending.

Julia did so, but experienced emotional turmoil. "I was just stunned and really depressed for a while. I had to go through withdrawal. My life was changed forever."

More often than not, when someone leaves behind a life of legalism, a kind of shock sets in as they slowly discard the wrong set of rules they've been taught.

At first, there are more questions than answers: *Where do I go from here? How do I live my life? What do I believe now?*

Recovering legalists deal with various stages of grief over the time they spent in a flawed belief system—anger, betrayal, remorse.

Julia didn't stay out of church once she left legalism, but says she was never able to give her heart again like she had in the past. In some cases, when members leave a legalistic lifestyle behind, friends they've known and loved turn their backs on the ones who leave the legalistic belief system. Why? Because legalists are taught they're the only ones who know "the truth."

Sadly, the yoke of legalism binds Christians tighter than any chains can. The truth is that freedom, real freedom, is found when we're yoked only with Christ. □

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Yoke: a wooden bar by which draft animals are joined at the necks for pulling loads.