

providing a future with hope

Challenger

The Challenger
is a publication
of Life Challenge of
Southeastern Michigan

enlightening empowering equipping

March 2006

WHICH IS WORSE: Alcoholism or Legalism?

By Jeff Bonzelaar, Executive Director

“Legalism is a more dangerous disease than alcoholism because it doesn’t look like one. Alcoholism makes men fail; legalism helps them succeed in the world. Alcoholism makes men depend on the bottle; legalism makes them self-sufficient, depending on no one.” (John Piper)

God hates legalism as much as He hates alcoholism. Alcoholism destroys lives but so does legalism. The effects may not be as dramatic, but legalism is just as damning. In fact, legalism has sent far more people to hell than alcoholism because the vast majority of people are legalists.

Legalism is essentially a “do-it-yourself-get-the-glory” religion. There are endless variations, but they all share a common denominator—the belief that you can save yourself. With enough hard work and good deeds, you can “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.” We Americans love such a message, but so does the rest of the world.

Whether it’s dipping in the Ganges River, visiting Mecca, attending mass, observing special days, avoiding certain foods, passing out tracts, knocking on doors, giving your tithes and offerings, teaching a Sunday School class, volunteering at your child’s school, or simply minding your own business, the mindset is the same: You can earn your keep. Re-

wards come to those who are good.

Legalism is addicting because it appeals to our pride. Legalism assumes that we are not all that bad or helpless. If we apply ourselves and live according to a certain set of standards, *God* (whomever He/She might be) will have no choice but to accept us. That’s definitely ego-gratifying.

But there’s another reason legalism is so appealing. It looks good. It is moral and upright. It is strong and successful. Who doesn’t appreciate a considerate neighbor or a hard-working employee? What pastor doesn’t relish a committed congregant? We praise such people. We pro-

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mote such people. They are our friends. So our approval only reinforces the self-justifying behaviors in others.

We must not be deceived by appearances. Satan disguises the deadliest sins as the prettiest. Our society has little tolerance for murderers or thieves. Nobody appreciates being told a lie. Few would disagree that drinking and drugging and carousing around are bad things to do.

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But being *good*? What's so "bad" about that?

What's interesting to note is that the Apostle Paul's harshest remarks in Scripture are reserved for the Galatians. Unlike his other letters, there are no compliments or endearing comments given to fellow brothers and sisters. He's in "attack-mode" from the get-go. His tone is one of anger and grief: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one" (1:6-7).

Twice, Paul calls down a curse on certain persons (see 1:8-9). Why was Paul so upset? There is no mention in the first 5½ chapters of any gross sin (unlike his letter, for instance, to the Corinthians). Evidently, there were some in the church who taught that Christ's work at Calvary was not enough for our salvation. They insisted that a person had to keep additional requirements if he or she was to meet with God's approval.

Paul's response was straightforward: "It was for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. . . For in Christ Jesus

neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (5:1, 6).

We need to pay close attention to Paul's exhortation: "*But what does the Scripture say? 'Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son'*" (Gal. 4:3). The phrase "get rid of" comes from the same Greek word used for the casting out of demons. This is serious stuff. Hagar is not far from any of us.

Slipping into a legalistic life-style is easy to do. There is a "lawyer-like person" within each one of us who desires to justify himself (see Lk.10:25, 29). On top of that, legalism takes us unawares. At least with alcoholism, the wrong-doing is obvious (sooner or later).

I'm not saying that good works don't matter—they do, provided our motivation is right.

We are NOT to work for our acceptance with God but *from* our acceptance with Him.

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His grace makes us acceptable. The joy and gratitude we experience in being declared righteous in Christ empowers us to live a holy life.

May we "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus," and may we repent of the confidence we put in our flesh (2 Tim. 2:1). We're all in some form of recovery if we're honest.



Testimony

Kathleen Kmiecik

"I grew up on the east side of Detroit. My family went to mass at a nearby Catholic church. I remember being told that Jesus died on a cross and that His birthday was December 25 but not much more.

What I do remember well is being called "dumb" a lot because I was slower in school than the other kids. I found relief from the pain and hurt in marijuana. It helped me forget about my problems.

At sixteen years of age I dropped out of school and began working in a bar as a dancer. The money was very good, but the more I made the more drugs I used. Alcohol and cocaine were available in great supply. Crack cocaine eventually entered the picture and gained complete control of my life.

After many failed attempts in rehabilitation programs, my sister suggested that I go to church with her. An altar call was given at the close of the service and both of us went forward to give our hearts to Jesus. I loved the Lord but I didn't know how to live without drugs so I continued using.

In 1990 I entered a one-year residential Christian program for women. This was the first time I had ever gotten any instruction on how to live a life for Christ. But I was drawn back to the things of this world. Sin had a hold on me.

I ran away from God for the next 15 years and refused to listen to what He was saying to my heart. I knew He was calling me but I didn't want to face who I really was. During this time I became pregnant by a man I hardly knew and in 1997, at the age of 33, I became a mother. Because of the drugs and lifestyle, I couldn't care for my son. When Matt was two years old I left him with a baby-sitter for three days. The incident was reported to Social Services, and my son

was taken away from me.

One day I was walking by a church and felt drawn to it. I went inside and Life Challenge was there singing and giving testimonies about how the love and power of Christ had changed their lives. I saw something in them I knew I had to have. After a lot of prayers from the pastor and members of that church I finally entered Life Challenge.

When I walked through the doors I was like a blind person given sight for the first time. My eyes were opened to the truth. I couldn't get enough of God's Word. I lived for the classes and chapel every day so I could hear and learn more.

I am amazed that God had brought me out of my dark sin and into His marvelous light. I feel God working in me, making me stronger so that I can say "no" to the things that have always lured me back to my former way of life. I now have a personal relationship with Jesus and through His blood I am a new creation."

P.S. Kathleen graduated last month and is helping her sister care for their parents. She is active in the church that was supportive of her during her year in Life Challenge.



Here at Life Challenge, we believe that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is the only hope for sinful people like you and me. Thanks for standing with us as we proclaim this life changing message.

Together for souls,

Jeff