

LEGALISM AND LABELISM / *Galatians 1*

Paul encountered two forms of Jewish attitudes toward the law. Modern forms of these same attitudes can be found in Christianity today.

Legalism

“Legalism” is attempting to win God’s favor by our own determined efforts of dedication and obedience.

Then

In Paul’s time, Jews and many Jewish Christians believed that by faithful adherence to the law, they could win God’s approval. By strict adherence to the Mosaic code, they could earn righteous standing with God.

Now

Often without realizing it, we try to live up to God’s and other people’s expectations of how Christians should be—all this as a means of winning God’s approval. We do this by our efforts at obedience, dedication, full-time Christian service, academic study, and volunteer work. Some people try to be saved by working their way into heaven—they try to win God’s love or approval through perfectionistic duty.

Lesson

We must obey and serve freely out of love and gratitude to Christ. The Holy Spirit must empower us. Our dedicated service cannot remove sin or obtain saving grace.

Labelism

“Labelism” is pride of ownership for having the “right” religion.

Then

Jews saw their commitment to the law (primarily the Jewish food laws and circumcision) as a badge of ownership, a symbol of their performance of the historic covenant between them and God. They felt superior for their religious correctness and for upholding the “right” religion. Too often this adherence to the law was in name only.

Now

Some Christians display this same love for having the “right” label, identifying with the right church, pastor, denomination, or religious viewpoint. Often their only identity as believers is a stance taken quite proudly on a single issue. By comparing themselves spiritually, they demean others who don’t hold their view.

Lesson

Only Christ’s faithful work on the cross, which enables us to respond in faith, can save us.