

Hope for Prisoners of Legalism . . .

Jesus called out to the Jews of His day, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28). Yet in some churches today there is no rest, but a constant pressure to try to measure up to religious expectations. Through spiritual abuse and legalism, these churches turn Jesus’ promise of rest into a prison. Instead of being a house of prayer, the abusive church is a house that preys on God’s children. There is hope for the abused, for the same Jesus who offered rest nearly 2000 years ago is still offering you rest today.

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
(Matthew 11:28–30)

Q: “Is there no law for Christians to live by?”¹

God will write His law on your heart.

“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds.”
(Hebrews 10:16)

Q: “What is the difference between legalism and biblical obedience?”

Obedience is the act of conforming outwardly to God’s righteous standard and inwardly to the character of Christ through the enabling grace of God.

- In legalism, the resource is self-effort.
- In obedience, the resource is the Spirit of God.

Characteristics of Legalists²

Spiritual abuse and legalism produce symptoms of a deeper problem. When you see the symptoms, check to see if you are a victim of the disease.

Low self-worth—depression over failing to meet unrealistic expectations

Exclusivity³—excluding others who are not living by the same standards

Guilt—growing self-condemnation

Anger—frustration at not being perfect, not keeping all the rules and regulations

Lack of transparency—fear of not being accepted

Irritation in relationships—criticism of others

Self-sufficiency—pride in performance

Majoring on the minors—emphasis on the externals

“Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.”
(Galatians 1:10)

Key Verse to Memorize

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”
(Galatians 5:1)

Key Passage to Read and Reread

The Book of Galatians

Move from Legalism to Grace⁴

Get totally frustrated with your own efforts to please God. (Romans 7:14–15)

Realize God’s complete and unconditional love and acceptance of you. Eliminate all fear of not measuring up. (1 John 4:18)

Acept God’s resource (Christ within you) to enable you to live a life pleasing to God. (Galatians 2:20)

Commit to spending time in God’s Word so that God’s thoughts will become your thoughts. (Romans 12:2)

Expect God to be responsible for your spiritual growth, having faith that He will get the job done. (Philippians 1:6)

“You also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”
(Matthew 23:28)

Take the Self-Test⁵

- Am I Self-sufficient?**
Do I think I am religious because I am self-disciplined, using the right words and doing the right activities?
(Read Philippians 3:7 and Romans 4:2.)
- Am I Self-serving?**
Do I do good things for the wrong reasons? If I am honest, do I have a desire to feel good about myself and please myself more than a desire to please God?
(Read Galatians 6:12–15 and Matthew 6:1–2, 5.)
- Am I Shallow?**
Do others know the real me, or do I put up a false front? Can I admit to others that I struggle with certain areas in my life? Are my words and actions a reflection of how I really think and feel?
(Read Matthew 23:28 and Galatians 1:10.)
- Am I Seeking Security through Rules and Regulations?**
Do I substitute keeping laws for a heart relationship with God? Is my sense of security found in following traditions and man-made rules and standards?
(Read Galatians 4:8–11.)
- Am I Supersensitive?**
Am I touchy, judgmental, unloving, intolerant, or condemning of others? Do I find it hard to accept another believer whose thinking is different from mine?
(Read Matthew 12:1–2.)

Thank God for His . . .

Saving Grace

- “I know I cannot be saved by keeping the law.” (Ephesians 2:8–9)
- “Thank You for the gift of salvation—a gift I do not deserve.”

Sustaining Grace

- “I know I cannot lose my salvation.” (Ephesians 1:13–14)
- “Thank You for giving me the gift of eternal life that is guaranteed.”

Sufficient Grace

- “I know that through my weaknesses, God’s power will be made perfect within me.” (2 Corinthians 12:9)
- “Thank You for the gift of Your power—all that I need in difficulty.”

Sanctifying Grace

- “I know I have been given victory over sin.” (Romans 6:14)
- “Thank You for the gift of Your grace to live a godly life.”

Related Topics . . .

- Codependency:
Moving from Bondage to Balance
- Manipulation:
Severing the Strings of Control
- Self-Worth:
Discerning Your God-Given Value
- Submission:
Yielding from a Spirit of Strength
- Victimization:
Victory Over the Victim Mentality

HOPE FOR THE HEART’s *Biblical Counseling Library Quick Reference* provides immediate, concise, biblical truths for today’s problems.

For more comprehensive help, refer to our *Biblical Counseling Keys . . .*

Spiritual Abuse & Legalism:
Afflicted by Authority.

If you would like more information, call 1-800-488-HOPE (4673) or visit www.hopefortheheart.org.

For prayer encouragement and biblical counsel call 1-866-570-HOPE (4673).

1. Discipleship Counseling Services, *Discipleship Counseling Training Student Manual* (Dallas: Discipleship Counseling Services, n.d.).
2. For this section see David A. Seamands, *Healing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1988), 12–19, 26, 100–5, 127–38, 158–60.
3. David R. Miller, *Breaking Free: Rescuing Families from the Clutches of Legalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 7–8.
4. For this section, see Kevin A. Miller, “I Don’t Feel Like a Very Good Christian: Why Does It Seem That You Can Never Quite Measure Up?” *Discipleship Journal*, September/October 1988, 9; David R. Miller, *Breaking Free: Rescuing Families from the Clutches of Legalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 174.
5. For this section see Martin R. De Haan, *I’m Not a Legalist, Am I?* (Grand Rapids: Radio Bible Class, 1988), 4–30.



HOPE
for the Heart
*Together . . . Changing Minds.
Changing Hearts. Changing Lives.*
P.O. Box 7, Dallas, TX 75221

Scripture taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*.
Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of
Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.