

## Small Group Guide

# LEGALISM: ITS ATTRACTION, ABSURDITY, AND ANTIDOTES

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The Church at Brook Hills,

Dr. Bart Box

February 20, 2011

Acts 15:1-35

This guide is a tool to help you lead your group into spiritual transformation. Use it as a resource to lead your group in discovering, owning, and applying the truths of God's Word. There may be aspects you do not want to use and there may be instances where you just want to focus on a particular point or truth. Some questions may bring out emotions and cause people to dwell on an aspect of their relationship with God. Your role is to help facilitate this encounter with God in His Word through His Body, not just to complete the guide. Use this as a flexible teaching tool not a rigid group task list.

## Relate . . .

Begin your group time by engaging in relational conversations and prayer that may include the following elements:

**Welcome**—a simple, brief time to greet one another (especially new friends), enjoy refreshments, and make announcements.

**Review**—a time to review the truths discussed last week and report on how members have had success or frustrations in applying those truths during the week. The leader will want to provide encouragement and shepherding during this time. Periodically, the leader will also want to review the gospel and allow members to share reports about opportunities they've had to share the gospel. Occasionally, the leader will want to revisit the vision for the group and discuss ways to accomplish that vision better.

**Prayer**—a time of general prayer with the whole group praying for struggles regarding the application of truths, for those with whom the group is sharing the gospel, and for understanding of today's truths.

## Reflect . . .

Use the following summary and questions to review this week's message and reflect on its implications in our lives:

### Sermon Outline

#### Three Aspects of Legalism

- The Attraction of Legalism...
  - Is rooted in our desire for acceptance before God.
  - Is evident in its appeal among the religious. (Acts 15:1, 5)
    - The religious leaders in Jesus' day struggled with legalism.
    - The early church struggled with legalism. (Galatians 1:6-9)
    - The church today struggles with legalism.
- The Absurdity of Legalism...
  - Is seen in the eternal plan of God.
    - Peter saw God's plan through the Holy Spirit. (Acts 15:7-11)
    - Paul and Barnabas saw God's plan among the Gentiles. (Acts 15:12)
    - James saw God's plan in the Scriptures. (Acts 15:15-16)
  - Is apparent in the universal failure of man.
    - No one can achieve conformity to the law. (Romans 3:9-18)
    - No one can avoid guilt from the law.
- The Antidotes to Legalism...
  - Are found in gospel conviction. (Acts 15:19-21)
    - We are flexible in matters of indifference.
    - We are inflexible in matters of the gospel. (Galatians 1:8)

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- Are found in gospel clarity. (Acts 15:11)
  - We are saved by grace alone.
  - We are saved in Christ alone.
- Are found in gospel consequences.
  - We must remember that legalism threatens the mission.
  - We must remember that legalism obscures God's glory. (Acts 15:14)
  - We must remember that legalism undermines our salvation.
  - We must remember that legalism destroys our confidence. (Acts 15:31)

*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:4-9)*

### Message Summary

Some Jewish believers had begun preaching that new Gentile converts to the Gospel needed to completely obey the Law given to Moses and demonstrate their new faith by following the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham (circumcision). They were not teaching that Jesus was not the Savior; but they were teaching that salvation required Jesus AND the Law. This type of legalism was a result of religious people seeking to make themselves acceptable before God through some works of their own. Consequently a Council met in Jerusalem to discuss, debate, and decide the final outcome of the debate. Here, Early Church leaders argued that the provision of the Holy Spirit and God's Word from the very beginning were evidence of His plan to provide salvation to the Gentiles and the Jews through His grace alone. James ruled that Gentiles came to salvation through faith in Christ alone and that works were unable to provide a right standing before God. Therefore, believers are to stand on the conviction and clarity of the truth of the Gospel while not unnecessarily offending others in matters of indifference.

### Discuss

Use the following questions to review the Head (What does God want me to know?), Heart (What does God want me to value?), and Hands (What does God want me to do?) aspects of the message.

- What were the intentions of the religious leaders in setting up additional regulations for following God rightly? Is it possible for good motives to add to the gospel and create legalism?
- What are some behaviors/practices in the modern church that can become or be considered legalistic behavior?
- What is the difference between engaging in devoted service toward God and performing those same actions in a legalistic manner?
- How can we engage in spiritual disciplines and godly behavior without allowing ourselves to become legalistic?
- To whom do we need to confess or apologize for any legalistic behavior or legalistic burdens that we have placed on others?
- Circumcision was commanded by God to be a sign of His people's (the Jews) covenant relationship with Him. How did Peter's argument concerning the giving of the Holy Spirit as a sign of their conversion indicate that circumcision was no longer needed as a physical sign of following God?
- What kind of slavery does legalism place on people to please God in their own power?
- In what areas of our lives might we need to ask God to restore our joy because we have been trying to earn His grace?
- What were some areas of indifference (non-essential beliefs or practices) inside the early New Testament Church, particularly between Gentiles and Jews?

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- What are some matters of indifference in our lives today, especially considering cultural and denominational differences?
- How does living in the freedom of God's grace give us the responsibility to be sensitive to the beliefs and cultures of others, particularly when trying to reach them with the Gospel?
- Have we or others responded in any way towards an issue of indifference that is potentially causing us to jeopardize God's mission?
- How does legalism threaten our mission and obscure God's Glory?
- What is the clear message of the Gospel upon which we must never compromise?
- How can we take steps to learn and develop essential convictions of the gospel?

### ***Respond . . .***

*Encourage your group to break out into smaller, same-gender groups where they will respond to the truths of the message. These groups will share with one another based on the following questions and then close in prayer:*

- What are some of the main truths that God wants you to know from the message?
- How do your thoughts need to adjust to align with these truths?
- According to the truths from the message, what does God want you to value?
- How do your values need to change to align with His values?
- What actions does God want you to take according to the truths of this message?
- What is an action that you can start to implement today or tomorrow?

Close this time by praying for each other, specifically for strength in the application of these truths and for the lost people with whom you are seeking to share the gospel.

### ***Weekly Prayer Focus ... (from the worship guide)***

- ***Lives and Church:*** *Pray that the Holy Spirit will use the men and families our faith family has identified and are commissioning around the world to proclaim the gospel, disciple men and women, and plant churches.*
- ***Local:*** *This week we are praying for our Small Group outreach to seniors in Tom Brown Village. We are also praying for Westwood Baptist Church, Les Hughes, Pastor.*
- ***Global:*** *This week we are praying for our partner Global Frontier Mission in Atlanta.*