

## Legalism

Legalism is like a disease. It is both highly contagious and deadly. It can go undetected and show no fatal symptoms for a long period of time. In the end, however, it always pays its toll. I've never heard anyone stand up and boldly proclaim, "I'm a legalist!" If someone realized they were bound by legalism they would surely put an end to it. Unfortunately legalism is very blinding. It's easier for a sinner to realize he is a sinner than for a legalist to realize he is a legalist. As long as we can't identify what legalism is, it can keep us in its bondage.

Legalism is oftentimes very hard to recognize and can be hard to distinguish from true holiness. This is because the actions of the legalist, and the actions of someone who possesses true holiness are generally the same. The difference is the motive of the heart. One's motivation is to save themselves, or keep themselves saved, while the other's motivation is to please the One who died for them.

Ray C. Stedman said:

"Do you see how subtle this can be? The actual behavior can be exactly the same in the case of a legalist or of one behaving as an authentic Christian. They both may be real Christians and their behavior may be exactly the same, but one is legalistic and other is not. It is what is going on inside that is the issue in question. It is a matter of inner reliance. What are you reckoning on to meet this demand? Are you counting on your own ability, your own adequacy, your talent, your personality? Is that what you are reckoning on in order to accomplish what is expected of you? Well, if you are reckoning on anything other than the activity of God at work in you, you are a legalist! ...The most widespread form of legality in the Christian church is the flesh, trying to do something before God which will be acceptable to him. In order to recognize what legalism is, we must first determine what true Christianity is. Christianity "is to manifest genuinely Christ-like behavior by dependence on the working of the Spirit of God within, motivated by a love for the glory and honor of God. True Christian life is fulfilling a law by means of a unique power because of an overwhelming desire. It requires an outward standard or code of behavior, an inward power which makes it possible to meet it, and a motive which drives us on to do so."

Legality on the other hand "is a mechanical and external behavior growing our [sic] of reliance on self, because of a desire to gain a reputation, display a skill, or satisfy an urge to personal power...It is religious performance, scrupulous and meticulous in its outward form, but inwardly, as Jesus described it, 'filled with dead men's bones.'"

Many believe that to avoid legalism, one must be an antinomianist (a person without any law). Nothing is further from the truth. Neither will the casting off of standards free one from legalism. Legalism is not the establishing of standards where the Bible does not address an issue. One must establish standards, or limitations for themselves. If one has a problem with playing tennis because it takes up too much of the time they should be spending with God, they might want to make a standard for themselves that they will not play tennis. It's not that the game of tennis that is evil, but the individual gets addicted to the game and loses self-control, allowing priorities to be mismanaged. This limitation might change when they mature as a Christian and can play the sport again in moderation.

On the flip-side of the coin, it is legalism to establish standards for other people when the Bible does not address the issue. Even standards for one's self can be dangerous if they have the wrong standard. It is possible to be legalistic in the standards you set for yourself. Legality then becomes a "making [of]

unwarranted demands on yourself or on someone else, especially in areas which are not prohibited in the Scriptures.

There are some things that are black and white in the Scriptures, but others are differing shades of gray. Those areas that are black and white must be preached, and preached hard! Even though the Bible is dogmatic on many subjects, there are other subjects in which it is not. There are some things in which “we are given a great deal of personal liberty, and it is legalism to make standards (particularly for someone else) in these areas.” It is legalism when a Christian or group of Christians make rules for everybody else to obey. If others want to do the same things as a particular Christian groups, having the same convictions as they, that is great. If, however, they are being forced to do something against their will, or without understanding, it is legalism. It becomes legality when we make unwarranted demands upon others in areas not prohibited by Scripture.

Daniel Segraves wrote concerning legalism:

Essentially, legalism is a reliance upon keeping the strict letter of a law as being meritorious, even apart from faith. As legalism is worked out, it is often expressed in an exaltation of human traditions to a status equal to or superior to God’s commandments or in a slavish adherence to a specific rule while failing to note the principle behind the rule and to apply it in similar situations. While the attractiveness of legalism for many people rests in its deceptive promise of assurance of salvation in return for perfect obedience, what it actually produces is fear, condemnation, guilt, and uncertainty. This is because the legalist’s faith is misplaced. It is in himself and his ability to adhere to a code of behavior rather than in Christ.

“Legalism means strict or excessive conformity to a legal code or set of rules. In a Christian context, legalism has two negative connotations: (1) attempting to base salvation on the performance of good works or on the strict observance of rules and regulations and (2) imposing rules on self and others that are not based on clear biblical teachings or principles. We are guilty of legalism if we imply that a person attains salvation by his works or if we preach rules without principles.” In fact, the basis upon which the legalist usually justifies his beliefs and practices is mere tradition and authority.

One of the fundamental flaws of a legalistic individual is his/her view of God’s law. The law of God is not some external code that God keeps or has made up specifically for mankind. Neither is God’s law arbitrary. He does not simply decide to approve of this and condemn that. Rather God’s law flows from God’s nature. It is a portrait of God’s person.

When we obey God’s law, we are not merely keeping a code of conduct, but relating to God Himself. The law has no inherent value or dignity apart from God. When we keep or break God’s law we are relating to God Himself. Sin is not merely the breaking of a law, but transgressing against the very nature of God, thus creating a personal attack on God Himself. Thus legalism—the idea that the law should be obeyed for its own sake—is unacceptable. The Law is a means of relating to a personal God. When we relate to the law as a separate entity apart from God’s essential being and nature, we have entered the arena of legalism.

Paul warned about an ascetic legalism that was attacking the first-century church in Colossians 2:18-23. He said that one could be cheated out of their reward in Christ by four things. These four things were (1) false, or voluntary humility, (2) worshipping of angels, (3) not giving Jesus His proper place as the Head of the body of Christ, (4) and “subjecting one’s self to human commandments and doctrines which teach that there is a spiritual benefit in abstaining from perishable created things which are not inherently

evil.”<sup>9</sup> These things do have an appearance of true wisdom, but it is merely a self-imposed religion that is not able to help a person overcome their sinful nature (v.23). The humility and worship that these ascetics were performing were not from God, but came from their own human will, contrary to what Jesus taught concerning the worship of God. He said worship was to come from one’s spirit (John 4:24).

This passage makes it clear that anything we abstain from or partake of in this physical world should aid us in overcoming the sinful nature and bring us closer to God. If this is not the design behind our actions then it is probably legalism and obedience to it should not be commanded to anyone seeing it is only a man-made rule. If one believes that this man-made, self-imposed, false humility and religion can grant them spirituality, holiness, or favor with God, they will lose their reward in Christ.

What kind of legalism is attacking the faith today? The most common form is that which leads “the believer away from absolute reliance upon Christ toward a self-confidence based on his ability to do or to abstain from certain things not specifically commended or prohibited in Scripture.”

Concerning this type of legalism Daniel Segraves comments:

“But the second form of legalism is more subtle, more difficult to detect and resist, and more apt to find acceptance among believers of every age, because it adapts itself cleverly to any culture and time. This is the system that makes one’s interpretation or application of Scripture equal in authority to Scripture itself. Every ascetic practice can, for example, be defended by general scriptural calls to devotion, commitment, and holiness. Even resistance to technological advances can be justified by appeals to disassociate ourselves from the world. This can be witnessed among the communities springing from the Anabaptists traditions which repudiate zippers, electricity, automobiles and other modern inventions.”

Legalism teaches a salvation that is based upon human works instead of God’s grace. This type of theology usually develops from a misunderstanding of how and where works fit into the born-again life. Legalism is a mentality, that leads to a way of life, which leads to doctrines not found in the Bible, which leads to a reliance upon one’s performance, instead of Jesus’ performance at Calvary for salvation, which leads to spiritual death.

The problems with legalism are endless. The worst problem is the eternal factor. If one relies upon their own works for salvation they will not make it to heaven no matter how moral they are seeing that they are going about to establish their own righteousness instead of relying upon the righteousness and grace of God (Galatians 2:21; 5:1-4). Salvation only comes by faith in Jesus’ work at Calvary. One cannot have faith in Jesus’ work and their own at the same time.

David Bernard commented on the difficulties of a legalistic system by saying:

Furthermore, those who follow a legalistic leader will eventually begin to doubt the validity of the system because of its harsh and arbitrary rules. As children grow up in the system they begin to question the rules. When new converts enter the system they often accept everything uncritically, but sooner or later they, too, begin to analyze the rules.

If a church is founded on true scriptural principles it will withstand scrutiny of its teachings. The legalist, however, usually gives no justification for his man-made rules except tradition and authority. “This is what our church believes, and you must obey the church. This is what the pastor teaches, and you must obey the pastor.” This kind of teaching will not be successful in developing true holiness. Particularly in our questioning age, it simply does not work. People today are more sophisticated and educated than ever before. There is a greater willingness to challenge tradition and authority.

Autocratic methods that people sometimes accepted in the past are less effective today. Furthermore, as the church enters an era of great revival, it must be prepared for the influx of thousands of new converts. If it relies on tradition and legalism, the new converts will either overwhelm it or fall away. If it teaches biblical principles of holiness, the new converts will embrace them as their own beliefs.

Legalists always exhibit certain characteristics. Among the many, they exhibit periods of great highs and lows based upon their performance, frustrations with trying to become more holy, contentious, condemnatory towards others who don't do as they do, a lack of patience with others growing in holiness, and usually like to control others.

Legalism is not teaching against separation from the world. Rather it is believing that you can be saved from doing so. The Bible teaches us to be holy. If teaching separation from the world is legalism, then God is the best legalist! It is God who said that friendship with the world is enmity against Him (James 4:4). It is God's Word that tells us that true religion is to keep oneself unspotted from the world (James 1:27). It is the Word of God that declares if you love the world, then you do not love God (I John 2:15-16). If you do not love these commandments you do not love God. One will not find antinomianism in the Bible.

The legalist and a true holy man or woman of God may have the same "works," but they both have different understandings and perspectives of how and where their works fit into their salvation. The legalist believes his works earn or keep his salvation, while the holy man or woman of God understand that they are living the way they do because they are saved. They just want to please their Lover. As Stedman said, "That is why, in any Christian activity, you have to be careful that your inner reliance is on God and not upon yourself. Otherwise it comes out all wrong and makes all the difference between heaven and hell, life and death. You can do exactly the same thing that someone else is doing and, if you do it with a sense of reliance on anything other than the Spirit of God, what they do will bless people but what you do will curse them."

So what do you do if you realize that you are in bondage to legalism? It is very simple. All you must do is repent for your sin and believe that God's mercy has forgiven you, and that His grace will help you live above this vice. Repent and believe. It seems too easy to be real, but it is the way that God has established. You cannot work to please God, so why not just give up and allow God to justify you by your faith and trust in Him!

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1. Stedman, Ray C., *Legalism* (Palo Alto, CA: Discovery Publishing, 1995), available online.

2. *Ibid.*, 4.

3. *Ibid.*, 5.

4. *Ibid.*, 3.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Segraves, Daniel L, *Collected Writings* (Stockton, CA: n.p., 1992), p. 63.

8. Bernard, David K. *Practical Holiness: A Second Look* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1985) p. 33-34.

9. Segraves, p. 74.

10. *Ibid.*, 75.

11. *Ibid.*, 76.

12. Bernard, 66-67.

13. Stedman, 4.

## Legalism by Joe Bliffen

Legalism claims faithfulness to the scriptures but makes deductions, assumptions and conclusions equal to the written words of the Bible. One quick example of legalism is the insistence on observing the Lord's Supper every Sunday. I want to say here at the start that I [Joe] believe observing the Lord's Supper each week is a proper understanding of the Scriptures. [I believe it can be helpful but it is never commanded in Scripture. If we want to follow the "letter of the Law" then Acts two would indicate we must meet daily and observe the Lord's Table daily as well. There is a double-standard here for those who hold to this view]

My problem is that I cannot cite a verse in the scriptures that specifically commands the observance of the Lord's Supper each Sunday. Because the Bible does not contain a specific in command or example for the frequency of the Lord's Supper, everyone is free to practice communion as often as they want.

The practice of the weekly observance of communion is based on four pieces of evidence:

- 1) the extra-biblical histories of the early church fathers and defenders (called "apologists") of the Christian faith;
- 2) the writings of protestant reformers;
- 3) the weekly collection of money in I Corinthians 16:2; and
- 4) specifically Acts 20:7 which says, "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread".

Nowhere in the scriptures does it say that the disciples, Christians, came together the FIRST DAY OF EVERY WEEK TO OBSERVE THE LORD'S SUPPER, THE LORD'S TABLE OR COMMUNION. Even the phrase "break bread" or even "break the bread"(as in Acts 2:42 but not in Acts 20:7) may or may not refer to communion.

Yet when a legalist reads Acts 20:7 he says this verse MEANS the disciples came together "the first day of every week to observe the Lord's Supper". Maybe it does. And maybe it doesn't. But the legalist insists "the Bible says we are to observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday AND those who do not observe communion every Sunday are disobeying the word of God."

Ask a legalist who is and who is not going to be saved and very often they will tell you. Ask a legalist a question about any issue and they will not only cite specific passages of scripture to support their conclusions, they will also tell you what is the right belief and practice and moral and ethic, as they often say, "in God's eyes." Any time someone begins a sentence with, "In God's eyes . . ." put up your guard. I find it quite presumptuous for anyone to tell me how God sees things. What a person should say is this: "In the Bible it says . . . and I believe this passage, along with all the other relevant passages, means . . ."

The path that leads to everlasting life is straight and narrow. And anyone who strays off that path, either as a legalist or a liberal, is, I believe, crossing a sacred threshold. Legalists like to call themselves conservatives. But they are not conservatives - they are legalists. A conservative is one who takes exactly what the Bible says, AND ONLY what the Bible says, as his rule of faith and practice and morals and ethics, and no more. I know a legalist when I see one because I used to be one.

## What Legalism Is and Is Not

There are different aspects to, or different manifestations of legalism. The following are the most notable:

1. A reliance on one's own performance to merit favor before God, rather than relying on Christ's performance at Calvary on their behalf
2. Relating to God on the basis of works rather than on the basis of faith (an extension of the former)
3. Confusing personal convictions/persuasions with Biblical mandates, ascribing equal authority to both categories
4. Enforcing extra-Biblical moral standards on other Christians (an extension of point 3).

The difference between the 3rd and 4th form of legalism could be summed up as "private vs. public." The 3rd form of legalism is when one is personally confused, not able to distinguish the difference between the Biblical commands and personal convictions/ persuasions. The 4th form of legalism is an extension of the 3rd, manifested when the individual suffering from the 3rd form turns his personal confusion into a public mandate, requiring all saints within his authority/influence to abide by his extra-Biblical standards.

### Examples of legalism

Most of us are familiar with the famous comic, Jeff Foxworthy. While he has his famous redneck test ("you might be a redneck if..."), I have my not so famous legalist test ("you might be a legalist if..."). Here are some illustrations of the four types of legalism named above.

1. If you think you must become good enough, or do a certain number of good works in order to be saved and/or maintain your salvation status with God...you might be a legalist. If, when you sin you feel as though you cannot come before God until you have met some sort of probationary period to regain your worthiness...you might be a legalist.
2. If, when you think about the way God sees you, you can only think of your good or bad works, rather than thinking about your acceptance before God in Jesus Christ...you might be a legalist.
3. If you elevate Christian traditions (particularly moral traditions) to a status on par with the teaching of Scripture itself...you might be a legalist.
4. If you require others to live in the same manner as you do, and yet you cannot find the behavior you are prescribing or prohibiting in Scripture...you might be a legalist.

### Legalism is a Universal Tendency of Mankind

Legalism is common to us all in one degree or another because it is consistent with man's nature. We want to do everything on our own; i.e. we are self-sufficient. This is even evident in toddlers who commonly say "I do it!!!, I do it!!!" with great anger and vigor when mom or dad try to do something for them. Human beings like being in control. That's why we rebelled against God to begin with. We didn't want God to hold that place of authority over us. So when it comes to good works we look at them as the way in which we can control our salvation. If we are bad, we forfeit salvation; if we are good, we earn it.

That is why the message of salvation by faith in Christ apart from good works is so difficult for us to accept. We want to be able to have some control over our salvation, to make some sort of contribution as it were, and yet the Gospel says “Christ did it all, and there’s nothing more you can add to it. You must accept what Christ did for you on your behalf, or you will die in your sins.”

That’s why Paul noted in Galatians 5:3-4 that if you trust in your works (circumcision in the case of the Galatians) Christ will profit you nothing. He said that those who trusted in their works (circumcision) had fallen from grace. How? It was because they were trusting in what they could do, working for a reward (salvation) rather than trusting in what God did for them and accepting salvation as the unmerited free gift of God that it is. Those with a legalistic mentality forget that God justifies the ungodly (Rom 4:5:), thinking rather that they must become godly before God will accept them.

Works (in the sense of doing good things with the idea that by doing such you will earn your favor before God, not in the sense of obedience to God’s commands out of a love for Him and in appreciation of His act of salvation on our behalf) are opposed to faith/grace. They are antithetical. It is like hot and cold water. You can get both out of the same faucet, but not at the same time. If you are using cold water, you cannot get hot water. If you are using hot water, you cannot get cold water.

Likewise if you are relating to God on the basis of your works, you cannot receive grace. But if you are relating to God on the basis of your faith, there is no room for works. Works require a reward. Grace does not. We cannot be saved by our works because that is not the way salvation comes to man. It comes as a free gift only. But you cannot give a gift to someone who has earned it (Rom 4:1-8). So when one works for their salvation, God cannot give them salvation because His salvation is free, not a reward for good behavior. That is why there can be no grace in the presence of works. To rely on one’s own performance for their justification before God is to fall from grace.

### **Conservatism is not Legalism**

Another thing Christians often confuse is conservatism for legalism. This is unfortunate. There is a difference between a morally conservative individual and a legalistic individual, although to most Christians they are one and the same. The difference is not in their actions per se, but in how they think about their actions (mentality).

The legalist thinks his right behavior grants him favor before God that He otherwise would not have had, or he thinks his right behavior can keep him saved. A morally conservative individual understands that no amount of good works can earn one favor with God and that no one can do good works without the grace of God, but also understands that we are to do good works because we have been saved (Eph 2:9-10). For this individual good works are an act of love toward a gracious God because we have been saved by Him, not personal achievements that we must meet in order to be saved.

There is no question that we must be holy, and that holiness applies to every area of our lives. Too many Christians, however, fail to apply Biblical holiness principles to their lives consistently. They do not apply them when it comes to where they go, what they say, what they watch, what they listen to, what they do, how they look, etc. When they encounter other Christians who are concerned about those areas and are applying Biblical principles to the same it is easy to label them as legalists, or simply as conservatives, and have sort of a disdain for them as though they are too radical. I do not think these people are all that conservative, or too radical.

I think the majority of us are simply too lax when it comes to being holy. Those we often look at as conservatives or ultra-conservatives are simply being consistent in their holiness, not relegating it to certain parts of their lives while ignoring the application of holiness to others. But when you are on the far left, those on the right look like they are far far away, even if they are only moderately to the right!

I do not think we can be too conservative when it comes to Biblical morality and applying Biblical principles to every part of our lives. I am not opposed to ultra-conservatives in the least. What I am opposed to are conservatives turned legalists, damning and condemning everyone who does not do as they do. That is when it turns ugly, and when the title of “legalist” is justified.

As long as what we are doing is unto the Lord is a good thing. Even if something is not technically a sin in God’s eyes, what matters is that the person who refrains from doing whatever it is that they think is wrong is refraining from doing it as unto the Lord. That’s what matters-not whether they are right or wrong per se (see Romans 14; I Cor 8, 10).

They are doing it for His sake, trying to please Him, and such an attitude is pleasing to God. Conservatism, or ultra-conservatism only becomes bad when we think that our works can bring us salvation, or when we impose our extra-Biblical persuasions on others, or judge those who do not line up with our own personal moral standards.