

LEGALISM

Intro.

A. We are hearing more and more the terms "legalist" in religious circles.

1. They are used as derogatory terms.
2. Supposedly, to be a "legalist" is something very bad.

B. Legalism defined:

1. "1. Of, based upon, or authorized by law. 2. In conformity with the positive rules of law; permitted by law; as, a legal act." (Webster)
2. "Scripture is full of judicial terms such as righteousness, transgression, judge, judgment, covenant, condemnation.
 - i. They define the relationship between God and man as essentially one of Ruler and ruled, King and subject, hence, the importance of the concept of law." (Bakers' Dictionary of Theology)
3. "...In a wider sense it is applied to the views of fanatics who refuse to recognize any law but their own subjective ideas which they usually claim are from the Holy Spirit." (Baker's Dictionary of Theology)

I. **THOSE WHO SEEK SALVATION BY WORKS ALONE ARE LEGALISTS.**

A. It was a common problem among the Jews.

1. They sought salvation on the basis of law keeping (works only).
 - a. Paul worked to correct this problem.
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Romans 9:30-31 What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; [31] but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law.

2. No one achieved keeping the law perfectly.

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. [2] Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? [3] Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? [4] Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? [5] Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— [6] just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?

[7] Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. [8] And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." [9] So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

[10] For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." [11] Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." [12] But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them."

Hebrews 10:1-4

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. [2] Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? [3] But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin every year. [4] For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

B. It is in Roman Catholicism.

1. Do penance for sin, pay money, make pilgrimages, prayer, fastings, do good works.
 - a. These were works of merit that men had devised.

2. Martin Luther renounced this in the reformation. He went to the opposite extreme of "faith only," i.e., man could do nothing to be saved.

C. It is in Calvinism.

1. One tenant of Calvinism is imputed righteousness. It says that Christ's perfect righteousness is imputed to believers so that God does not see their sins.
2. In explaining why Christ's righteousness was imputed, Calvin reasoned from the standpoint of legalism. He said that we obtained righteousness through Christ's perfect obedience; i.e., through His perfect law keeping.
3. It is true that Christ kept the Law perfectly, but one is not made righteous because of that.
 - a. He is made righteous through the perfect sacrifice of Christ when he, through obedience, receives the benefits of that sacrifice.

II. "Legalism" Is The Disposition To Make Or Bind Laws Were God Has Made Has Not.

A. The Pharisees were the perfect example. Matt. 15:1-20

1. First, Jesus rebukes them for their traditions. Vs. 8-9
2. Secondly, He showed external things do not defile a person. Vs. 10-11
3. Still, the disciples did not understand; and Jesus explains it more fully. Vs. 15-20

B. Those who bind traditions and/or their own convictions become legalists.

Galatians 4:10-11 You observe days and months and seasons and years! [11] I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Romans 14:6 The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to

God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

1. **Examples:** Carnal warfare; one cup when taking the Lord's Supper; a church cannot use Bible classes in seeking to teach the Bible.

C. Some think that requiring works (laws) is being like a Pharisee.

1. They think they have passages to back them up.
2. Eph. 2:8-9 - They say, "Salvation is not of works."

Eph. 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

- a. We must ask, "What kind of works are being considered here?"
- b. The context shows that the source or origin of salvation is from the grace of God, not from the works of men.

(1) It is "not of yourselves" (vs. 8); it is not from works that man can boast of (vs. 9).

(2) Rom. 4:1-5

- c. If one were able to work perfectly (relying on works alone), salvation would be owed to him as a debt.

(1) But the one who does not work perfectly (does not rely on works alone), his faith is accounted for righteousness.

(2) Rom. 4:1-5 does not mean that Abraham did no works at all to be justified because Heb. 11:8 says, "By faith Abraham obeyed..."

C. IS STRICT ADHERENCE TO GOD'S LAW LEGALISM?

1. Strict adherence to God's law is taught in both Testaments. Eccl. 12:13-14; Ps 119:30-35; 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 6:2; 1 John 2:3-5
2. We all must be "legalists" in the sense of strict adherence to God's law.
3. People often ask, "How strict must I be?" In other words, they don't want to be too strict lest they be "legalists."
4. Sometimes with man's laws, one is not too strict; e.g., even though the speed limit is 45, most will drive about 50.
 - a. The Quick-check-out counter says, "20 items or less." Can I get through with 21 items?
5. People reason the same way regarding God's laws:
 - a. "To steal something big is wrong, but to steal a very small thing is not bad." "To tell a little lie is not bad; everyone does it."
 - b. "To miss services on Wed. nights or Sun. nights is all right."
 - c. Our denominational friends reason the same way regarding truth: "It is not important to follow every little detail in God's word, after all, we don't want to be to picky."
 - (1) With this attitude, after several years, what they are doing doesn't remotely resemble what God ordained.
6. When we transgress God's law, we sin. 1 John 5:3
 - a. God does not think and operate like man. Isa. 55:8-9
 - b. All transgression and disobedience will be punished. Heb. 2:2-3; 10:28-29

Hebrews 2:2-3 For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, [3] how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard,

- c. If we do not abide in the doctrine, we don't have God. 2 John 9;

2 John 1:9 Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

4. **THIS WILL NEVER HAPPEN**, By Frank Dunn in a Bulletin entitled, Good News: "A customer shopping in a store came to an item that was marked 98 cents. Thinking the price too high, he wrote 49 cents. The customer did this to several articles. At last, he came down before the checker with the cart filled with marked down items. The checker began to check. Noticing the changed prices he remarked: "I'm sorry we priced these items too high for you, and hope the price you marked suits you, for it suits us perfectly too." "Certainly, this is absurd, but thousands of people will stand before the Lord Jesus on the other side of life with a life-long list of marked down activities. Instead of faithful attendance, they will bring before Him irregular attendance. Instead of liberal giving, they will bring before Him giving that was sparing. Instead of complete obedience, they will bring partial obedience. Do you think that our Lord will say, "I'm sorry that I made the requirements too high for you? Pass on through -- heaven is yours"???

Conclusion.

- A. Are we "legalists?" We ought to be in the sense of obeying God. John 15:14
 - B. When people oppose the law of the Lord where does that leave them? 1 Pet. 4:17-18
1. Apart from obedience to the gospel, there is no promise of forgiveness.
 2. In effect, the sinner who hasn't obeyed the Lord is depending on his own personal works or moral goodness to save himself.

3. Actually, he is a legalist in the sense of making his own laws.

C. God's laws must be obeyed.

1. Baptism in water for the remission of sins is one of those commands.

Acts 10:48

2. Have you obeyed the gospel?

(From Steve Wallace and reworked by David Riggs)