

What is Legalism?

Works of Law or exhortation to Obedience

by Tony Warren

W

hen the question is asked, "*what is the Biblical definition of legalism, and what constitutes a legalist,*" the answers one gets can be as varied and as diverse as the colors of the rainbow. It is a testament to the sad state of affairs in the church that most professing Christians today would look upon any exhorting of obedience to God's laws, or most witnessing to His judgments against sin, as a form of legalism. So what is Legalism? Many see it as testifying to any of God's laws that doesn't agree with their point of view.



"Legalism is what a person calls any system that has them observe laws which they don't agree with, and a legalist is anyone who stands theologically to the right of where they stand."

-WiseManSay

This saying probably hits a lot closer to the mark in describing what many Christians believe than we'd like to admit. So what is legalism really? Simply put, legalism is any belief system that supports the contention that man's salvation is in some way connected to his own works through obedience to God's law. That is to say, salvation either through maintaining good conduct, or some other meritorious action. Those who believe that man can get into the Kingdom of Heaven by a strict adherence to the law of God, or who believe that we are toiling in this world to become worthy before Him, are *legalists*. Whether these people believe that we must meet certain conditions (*as baptism or church membership*), or that we must maintain a strict adherence to laws in order to keep from losing salvation, these are all examples of legalists. In one way or another they believe that salvation in some way dependent upon man's obedience to the law (*thus the term, legalist*). In holding such doctrines that are contrary to God's divine Word, they become an adversary to the gospel truth of salvation by the faith of

Christ (*Grace*) alone. For God not only makes it abundantly clear how we are justified in His sight, but also how we can never be justified.

Galatians 2:16

- "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: ***for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.***"

There is no possibility of man standing justified before God by keeping the law. The obvious reason is because no man can keep the *whole* law perfectly. That is what would be required for anyone to be justified by it, for all sin in one way or another.

James 2:10

- "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all."

Thus the very system that the legalist puts himself under, is that which rises up to condemn him. In other words, even if he could of himself keep *most* of the laws of God, and then would have even one sinful thought (*transgression of the law*), he would be guilty of breaking that law, and thus fall under under the wrath of God. In offending in just one little point he would stand guilty of all. For God has declared that *the wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23). Man can never be justified or be looked upon as deserving before God by keeping the law. Anyone who believes that he can get right with God by his own strict obedience to the law, is by definition a legalist.

So why do legalists believe that they have support for their doctrines? The answer is simple. They read passages like 2nd Corinthians chapter 3 where God says that "*the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life,*" and they illogically presume from this that it's saying we shouldn't obey the letter of the law, or that since we can't fully obey the law, we should not even seek to obey it. But quite obviously God is not teaching us that obeying His laws kills us, nor is He saying that we can be obedient to the letter of the law (*which would be blasphemy*). God is telling us that obtaining *Salvation by trying to keep the law* is futile. It will only bring the judgment of death upon us for failing to keep it faithfully. While *Salvation by the precious faith of Christ and His righteousness*, is efficacious (2nd Peter 1:1), and the only way that we can merit everlasting life. If we depend upon our own attempts at keeping the law (our own righteousness), our failure to obtain perfection will condemn us to death. But a dependence upon Christ (and thus His Righteousness), is efficacious and will bring eternal life.

Philippians 3:9

- "And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:"

We can never gain righteousness before God by attempting to merit it by keeping the law. Only by the faithfulness of Christ, in whom we have access to God's grace, is there any meritorious works worthy of reward. Those works are not of ourselves (Ephesians 2:8), they are a by-product of the Spirit working within us. So we must be careful to understand that when God says that we are dead to the law, He does not mean that we no longer have to obey His law. Rather, God is declaring that *when* we are not obedient (*which is inevitable in the flesh*), the law does not condemn us for those transgressions because they were paid for in the Death of

Christ.

Romans 8:1

- "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

If we confuse grace with our own works of the law, the necessary distinction is blurred and we lose sight of what God meant when He said, "*those who are justified by the law, have fallen from grace*" (Galatians 5:4). This is legalism and addresses the departure from the doctrines of Grace. By the same token, if we separate ourselves from obedience to the law so that it becomes set against Grace, then there is an abandonment of real responsibility (Antinomianism), and we will see evidence in our lives of reprobation. Thus while we need to be careful not to label the belief in obedience, legalism, we must also be careful that we do not make Grace an excuse or covering for our disobedience to the law.

The sad reality of modernism is that more and more churches are using the word "legalism" improperly, so that exhorting to keep God's Commandments faithfully is almost seen as a bad thing. They are misusing the word so that anyone testifying that the law condemns anything unbiblical (*homosexuality, fornication, immodesty or women Pastors*) is labeled a legalist. In fact it has become increasingly popular among Ministers and Parishioners alike to accuse Christians of being legalistic whenever they bear witness to *anything* that the Lord's Word has forbidden. Typically they will abrogate or make void any testimony against immorality, impropriety, or illegality, by labeling those who witness against it as being judgmental and practicing a form of legalism. Likewise, those who faithfully witness that we should strive to be obedient to God's laws, are even called Pharisaic. Both these terms are usually used by those who don't really understand what either of them really means. It seems today's Christians have fallen so far from the faith of our fathers that they no longer recognize the difference between legalism, and the righteous exhorting of the church to adhere to faithful doctrines.

Hebrews 3:12-14

- "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.
- But ***exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.***
- For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end;"

It seems that the exhortation to steadfastness, warning against excess or the deceitfulness of sin, is looked upon today as some sort of hypocritical judgment. Many have been so sheltered away from sound historical Christianity that they often become jaded or confused when they hear faithful believers preach the examination of self for adherence to holiness and Godly living. These orthodox Christians are falsely labeled legalists when they are doing nothing more than striving to be Godly, as our Lord has commanded them to do.

Luke 13:23-24

- "Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them,
- Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able."

Exhorting to strive to follow God's laws and remain on the straight and narrow path is not legalism, but historical Christianity. It is a good and charitable thing for faithful people to declare that the wide and popular gate is the way of transgression, not hypocrisy that anyone should condemn. The fact that so many won't endure sound doctrine today, labeling it legalism, is not at all unexpected. Yet we are to continue to rebuke, reprove and exhort patiently.

2nd Timothy 4:1-4

- "I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom;
- Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.
- For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;
- And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables."

They turn away their ears because they don't like to hear the truth. This is because *truth inspires change*. Allow me to demonstrate by a practical example the misuse of this word legalism. Some church leaders have said that our manner of dress is strictly a matter of personal preference, and what we wear fits into the category of *Christian Liberty*. They claim that any teaching that establishes a dress code is therefore unbiblical and an exercise in legalism. But it doesn't take much honest reasoning to understand that if we were to follow these unbiblical presuppositions, Christians could wear their underwear to church. Or women could wear six inch skirts and (*according to the logic of these theologians*) they would still be perfectly within their (so-called) right of *Christian Liberty*. This is really nothing less than the spirit of disobedience at work, just as it was in the Garden of Eden when it declared, "*hath God said?*" For there is no such *Christian liberty* to be immodest, and the faithful church that speaks out against such immodest dress is not practicing legalism or any sort. It is exhorting faithful obedience in the righteousness of Christ.

1st Timothy 2:9-10

- "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array;
- But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works."

Can God's laws be tossed out the window in favor of modernism and the new age Christian philosophies of nullification, with no more than the word *legalism*. Not according to scripture. Our dress is not a matter of our personal preference, for without such universal Biblical laws against violations (1st Timothy 2:9, 1st Peter 3:3) concerning dress, we have wanton rebellion against God. We don't have Christian liberty or righteous freedom to ignore God's laws, what these people are encouraging is a return to the bondage of the world. It is by the Holy Spirit of wisdom that we understand that our adhering to these laws of God is not a form of legalism, but sound Biblical Christianity. While obedience to the law is not what brings about salvation, obedience to the law is *evidence* that we truly have the Spirit of Christ and earnestly love the Lord. It is the tangible proof that we trust and truly know our Christ, and are not merely kidding ourselves.

1st John 2:3-5

- "And **hereby** we do know that we know him, **if we keep his commandments**.
- He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, **is a Liar**, and the truth is

not in him.

- But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: **Hereby** know we that we are in him."

In other words, this is the tangible evidence that we really have the Spirit to know Christ and are truly saved. By this evidence we can know we have an actual personal, loving relationship with Him, where our earnest desire is to do His will and obediently serve Him. Understanding this most basic of truths, we will not call those who seek to faithfully keep His commandments, legalists. God says those who are obedient to his Commandments (law) are those who have this evidence of **truly knowing Him**. The Word declares hereby, or this is how they know that they know Him! By contrast, to those who without conscience disobey His commandments, labeling the strict obedience to His law as a form of legalism, God says they do not know Him:

2nd Thessalonians 1:7-8

- "And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels,
- In flaming fire taking vengeance ***on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel*** of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Those who do not know God, who do not obey His laws, are the complete opposites of those who are truly His people. Like those who call obedience to the law legalism and label disobedience their *Christian liberty*, these will have a rude awakening when they stand before God on Judgment Day. For they are those who do not abide in His laws, nor walk in the light of Christ as those who know God.

John 8:12

- "Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

It is troubling to our soul to see professing Christians today fighting so hard against those who come testifying to the Biblical precepts that clearly address their lusts, works, actions, code of conduct, and Christian values. Has the church lost the ability to distinguish between someone bearing witness to God's Word, and someone merely stating their opinions or personal preferences? The testimony of scripture is not personal opinion, rather it is the witness of things that are ordered by God. The willful transgression of those laws of God by professing Christians under the guise of a word like *legalism*, is not their faith in Grace. Rather, it is in fact evidence that they have no faith and do not truly understand Grace. It places man at enmity with God where he doesn't really know Him. The true believer doesn't think that Grace is an excuse to 'get around' God's laws. God forbid! He exhorts and tends to keep the law precisely because he is under Grace of God. The transgression of God's law actually vexes his soul, because God dwells within him.

Romans 6:1-2

- "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?
- God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?"

Living in transgression of God's laws because we know Grace abounds (*is in abundance to cover all sins*) is not the fruit of Grace, but evidence that we do not know Christ, and thus are not under Grace. The true child of God is born from above a *new creation* in Christ wherein he can

no longer live unrepentant in sin. Nor will he be predisposed to using colloquialisms like *legalism* or *Christian liberty* as a hiding place for his transgressions. For seeking Holiness and desiring that the assembly keep God's law, is not legalism, but a spiritual translation into the kingdom of righteousness.

1st Peter 1:14-16

- "As **obedient** children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance:
- But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation;
- Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy."

So again we see that legalism is certainly not exhorting to obedience of God's law. This exhorting, testimony or rebuke of the church is not something for Christians to condemn. Nor is believers seeking to do what is lawful to be construed as attempting to gain salvation by the works of the law. These things are not acts of legalism. Rather these are living proofs and evidences of a changed nature. Because of this changed nature in man, the believer will repent of transgressions of the law, and he will examine himself, and he will attempt to make corrections. What he will not do is pretend that he is not committing sin, or continue to live in his sin under the auspices of a church teaching that such rebuke of lawlessness is an act of legalism.

2nd Corinthians 13:5

- "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?"

An exhortation to examine ourselves by the law of God that we make our calling and election sure, is not practicing legalism. It is the obligation and duty of every Christian. This astounding lack of discernment of the difference between sound judgments that we seek to be as close to God as possible (*holiness - 2nd Timothy 3:17, 1st Peter 1:15-16*), and of legalism, is like scales that have formed over the eyes of the church. Judgments must be made in the congregation, and this is in no way practicing Pharisaic ideals or legalism. Those who label it thus do not have a firm grasp of what these terms mean.

Titus 1:7-8

- "For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre;
- But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate;"

Many undisciplined Christians today would call such judgments in the church about Bishops *egalism*, when in fact it is God's precepts that keep the church ordered, wisely governed, faithful, and sound. The trend of churches moving toward unorthodox doctrines and the disdain for those who make loving Christian judgments is due in no small measure to weak and/or liberal Pastors rationalizing away discipline, judgment, or chastisement of unfaithfulness. In their compromise of the gospel for the sake of alleged harmony, compassion, unity and charity, they have greased the church for its inevitable slide into spiritual declension and apostasy. They have moved the ancient landmarks so far away from the Word of God that they haven't a clue when they overstepped the boundaries. Indeed, there really doesn't seem to be many boundaries left anymore.

Proverbs 22:28

- "Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set."

The ancient landmarks, which once marked the boundaries of scripture, have been moved so far back that the words of men are now inside those boundaries, and masquerading as God's inspired Word. That is why today any judgment by the church at all is unpalatable and considered unwise, evil, or uncharitable. Anyone who preaches that we must live righteously is labeled a legalist who is hypocritically judging others.

Granted, sometimes Christians can be their own worst enemy. For we should not only preach God's Word and declare what God's law forbids, but we should also help others to understand God's intention in giving us these Commandments. Yes it is true that it is enough to know that God gave them, thus we should unquestionably obey them. But it is also wise to be patient and explain God's laws in the Spirit of love and understanding.

2nd Timothy 2:24-26

- "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,
- In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;
- And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will."

It is the duty of Christians to instruct without bitterness or misguided zeal, but with humility and leniency, particularly to those who in ignorance or lack of information do err. When people are taught in the Spirit of Christ, they may be more open to knowledge of the Word and begin to grasp what God intends by these laws. Thus they can better comprehend what they are hearing and reading is for their ultimate good. It is a rewarding experience to see their heart made joyful in obedience. When we teach a more thorough understanding of scripture, people find that by the Spirit working within them, they are no longer content with merely eliminating (*what we might call*) serious violations of the law. They will begin shaping their everyday lives in order to better serve God on a daily basis. It then no longer becomes a question of legalism, but a question of Lordship and love of God's laws. With the Spirit producing a changed and softened heart, our desire will be to live by the Word rather than be offended by it.

Psalms 119:10-12

- "With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments.
- Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.
- Blessed art thou, O LORD: teach me thy statutes."

Great is our realization that exhorting faithfulness to Godly and Biblical precepts in one's life is not legalism (*no matter how many professed Christians parrot this convoluted line*), it is the increase given by God. Strict obedience to God's law is not wrong, it is the evidence that God has graced us with an earnest desire to hide His Word within our hearts that we might not sin against Him. It's not something that we will abhor or disdain as a strict keeping of the law, but the nourishment unto life.

Matthew 4:4

- "But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."

The fact that faithful Christians have an earnest desire to be obedient, that they will stress the need for the church to obey the Scriptures, is the Glory to God. Hating the sin of the world is not unlawful, nor is the teaching that Christians should flee from it. On the contrary, this is evidence of the love of God. "*Friendship of the world is enmity with God, and whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God*" (James 4:4). We don't strive to see how far away from God's law we can live, but strive to be lawful and overcome the sins and lusts of the flesh. Having Biblical rules and guidelines to follow is pure Godliness, and refusing to compromise the Word for the sake of an artificial unity or ecumenism is a virtue. Living (and exhorting to live) a careful, lawful, moral and ordered Christian life, is not something to condemn, but something that the church should encourage.

Having said this, it is important not to stray from the definition of legalism as the belief that 'by' our faithfully adhering to good works or deeds or laws, we will merit blessings, rewards or salvation because of those deeds. Do not confuse the real meaning of legalism with that which many professed Christians teach. Many professing Christians today wouldn't know legalism if a book of law fell out of the sky upon their heads. Though it goes against the grain to speak out against the misuse of this word, we can by Godly conscience do nothing less. For it's not a matter of what seems right to man (Proverbs 16:25), but of what God declares is right. Let us not be *lawyers* who search the scriptures only to seek loopholes in the law or to find ways to avoid keeping it. For our keeping God's law is not a matter to be grieved over or labeled legalism, it's a matter of love. Jesus didn't have disdain for those who loved the law and understood keeping it was evidence of true salvation. On the contrary, He bore testimony of those who keep His law in their hearts. His disdain was reserved for the "real" hypocrites who thought they could be righteous *by* keeping the law.

John 9:41

- "Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth."

John 8:31-32

- "Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, ***If ye continue in my word***, then are ye my disciples indeed;
- And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Christ Jesus said that if we say that we have no sin (can keep the law), we are lying hypocrites and our sin remains. By the same token, He said that if we continue in His Word (keep His laws), then are we His disciples. Is this a contradiction? Does this sound like legalism for God to declare that if we keep His Word, we are His disciples? Our conclusion must be, no, not at all. Neither keeping the law, nor exhorting others to faithful obedience to the law, is legalism. It is the dependence upon our keeping the law in order to get us into the Kingdom that, is. While legalists blend the law into the gospel so that there is no distinction (*Salvation is somehow by law, and by Grace*), Antinomians separates the law and pits it against the gospel (*Salvation frees man from responsibility to keep the law*). Both are false concepts of Christianity. If we truly love God, we continue in His Word and will keep His laws. It is the fruit of the Spirit of righteousness we receive when we are truly in Christ. By contrast, if we are just kidding ourselves about knowing God, we will look for excuses why we don't have to obey God's laws, while still

professing to be under His Grace. So one may call obedience, legalism. One may call disobedience, Christian liberty. But this is gross error and in reality changes nothing. The preaching of the law *is* the preaching of the gospel, and thinking God's laws are passed away or are burdens too grievous for us, is not a sign of His Grace. It is a sign of the works of the devil and of worldliness. It's not a sign of Christian liberty, but of worldly bondage.

1st John 5:3-4

- "For ***this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments:*** and His commandments are not grievous.
- For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."

In keeping what Christ calls the first and greatest commandment, our loving our neighbors as ourselves, we are indeed keeping the law (Matthew 22:36-40). On these two Commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Shall we cast these laws out with a cry of legalism, or shall we understand that our love is revealed in the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:10). I suppose it all depends upon whether the spirit of disobedience or the Spirit of God to reveal these truths rests within us. In love we understand how the law is a part of our very being, and thus not subject to being abrogated as the ruling authority of our lives. Thus the misnomer of legalism will be soon seen for what it really is. Which of course is, the attempt by man to free himself from being a bond servant of Christ, so that he may live without any restraint of law. Is it any wonder that sin abounds in the church today, and what legalism represents is often defined by the precepts of man? Let us not fall into the snare of self-justification and hypocritical scapegoating.

In conclusion, what makes people legalists is their shared belief in the value of the works of man, and the insufficiency of the work of Christ unto salvation. But we must never forget that the saints not only sought to obey the righteous laws of God, they often obeyed them unto the death. It wasn't legalism then, and it's not legalism now. It was and is an evidence of true love for God, and thus His law.

May the Lord who is Gracious above all, give us the wisdom and understanding to humble ourselves before His most holy law, and rightly divide the Word of truth, that we may be blessed thereby.

Amen!

Peace,

Copyright ©2002 Tony Warren

For other studies free for the Receiving, Visit our web Site

The Mountain Retreat! <http://www.mountainretreatorg.net>

Feel free to duplicate, display or distribute this publication to anyone so long as the above copyright notice remains intact and there are no changes made to the article. This publication can be distributed only in its original form, unedited, and without cost.

Created 3/16/02 / Last Modified 8/4/14

The Mountain Retreat / twarren10@aol.com

[[Eschatology](#) | [Bible Studies](#) | [Classics](#) | [Articles](#) | [Other Articles](#) | [Sermons](#) | [Apologetics](#) | [F.A.Q.](#) | [Forum](#)]

The Mountain Retreat