

"Sir, we wish to see Jesus" — John 12:21

Time Change—November 1st

Set your clocks back one hour next Sunday

Legalism

(Editor's Note: The word "Legalism" when undefined creates confusion in the hearers. We would be better served to simply describe wrong attitudes by scripture!) - LWR

It is very common to hear the slur of "legalist" or "legalism" being hurled at those who would defend the truth. It is natural to hear such things when insistence is placed on what the Scriptures actually say.

Yet many will wear the term as a type of badge of honour. Many attempts have been made to justify "legalism" and a "legalistic" attitude in religious matters. There is no doubt that these attempts are well-intentioned, yet by commending "legalism" we may find ourselves justifying an attitude that Jesus has firmly condemned.

Normally legalism is defended by an appeal to its definition-- "strict, literal adherence to the law or to a particular code, as of religion or morality; a legal word, expression, or rule," as the American Heritage dictionary defines the term. The idea of holding firmly and strictly to the law of God as revealed in Scripture is then commended.

Let none be deceived: it is important for us to have authority for the things we say and do. All things should be done by Christ's authority (Colossians 3:17). If a practice comes with no Biblical authority, we should not participate in it (cf. Romans 14:23). Yet there is much more to the definition of "legalism" than just attempting to do what God says. We should first note what the more expansive definition of "legalism" is, evidenced in the Random House Dictionary's entry for the word:

"Strict adherence, or the principle of strict adherence, to law or prescription, esp. to the letter rather than the spirit; the doctrine that salvation is gained through good works. The judging of conduct in terms of adherence to precise laws."

As Christians we should be diligent to do the best we can to be properly understood. If we speak with someone who has a good understanding of the full meaning of "legalism," and we declare that we believe "legalism" to be a good idea, why should we be surprised if they believe that we think that we are saved by good works? The Scriptures are clear-- we cannot be saved by works (cf. Romans 3:21, Ephesians 2:8-9). We are saved through obedient faith (Romans 1:17, 6:2-21, 1 Peter 1:22, James 2:14-26). Therefore, on a theological level, we cannot be "legalists" and be pleasing to God.

Concern should be given over more than just the theological definition of the term. Consider the constant emphasis: "strict adherence." "Adherence to precise laws." In the eyes of many, this is not a bad thing-- we should strive to adhere to God's standards. Yet again, however, we have a challenge. While it is absolutely true that we should strive to adhere to God's standards, there is more to "strict adherence" than simply "striving to do God's will." "Strict adherence" has a negative, as well

Wear Masks

Today's Schedule

The Lord's Day

8:30 - Assembly
Building

9:30 - Assembly
Building

10:30 - Assembly
Building

as positive, dimension.

This is best illustrated by the Biblical examples of the legalists: the scribes, the lawyers, and the Pharisees. These are the ones whom Jesus condemned for their intransigence and immorality (cf. Matthew 23:1-39). Let us notice what it was that they did. We must first make clear that Jesus followed the Law and God's purposes and yet was not a legalist. In Matthew 5:17-18 He declares that He came to fulfil the Law; in Matthew 23:23, He does not condemn the Pharisees and scribes for following the minutiae of the Law, the tithing of various spices. Jesus' quarrel is not with doing what God says in the way God says to do it. Yet notice what He says about these scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 5:20:

"For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven."

What was the problem with the "righteousness" of the scribes and Pharisees? It was based in their legalism-- strict adherence, to be sure, but strict adherence often with the intention of doing the least that was necessary or justifying current conduct. It is a carnal desire-- missing the purposes and character of God in search for the minutiae that would justify them. This same spirit can be discerned in the lawyer questioning Jesus in Luke 10:25-29. There is no better example of true legalism in action. The lawyer tests Jesus by seeing what He will say is necessary for salvation. Jesus gets the lawyer to make the appropriate answer-- the exhortations to love God and neighbour. And then the legalism comes in-- the lawyer wants to justify himself, to establish the "strict adherence" that will make everything easier, asking who his neighbour is, and hoping to hear that it is his fellow Jew to whom he already acts as he should. Jesus answers him with the parable of the good Samaritan, and the lawyer is duly shamed (Luke 10:30-37).

It may seem ironic, but it is certainly the case: our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of a legalist if we desire to be saved. The reason for this has nothing to do with the desire to follow God's purposes. The reason is that the true legalist sees everything in terms of law and has missed the example of Christ who was the fulfilment of the Law of Moses and the embodiment of God's expectations for believers today (cf. Matthew 5:17-18, Romans 8:29, 1 Corinthians 11:1, 1 John 2:3-6). When law is the focus, conformity to the image of the Son, understanding the will of God and accomplishing it in a form of "second nature" is not. Instead, legalism is all about the bare minimum and doing whatever is possible. "If I can I should" is axiomatic for the legalist! Many examples could be brought forth to establish the principle. The legalist declares that he is only required to assemble with the saints

on the first day of the week in the main assembly to partake of the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7); he will not be there for any other opportunity when the saints come together. The legalist will very narrowly define how he has "prospered" and his giving will reflect that (1 Corinthians 16:1-3, 2 Corinthians 8-9). After all, it is about the letter of what is written. If the letter of what is written allows us to get away with something, all the merrier! (Editor's Note: The "letter" in this example is the false perception of one who leaves out the heart. In fact this person cannot properly apply God's written word! God's word has always required both "Spirit and Truth" - LWR)

There is reason for confidence that most of those who would defend the use of the terms "legalism" or "legalist" would be uncomfortable with the examples illustrated above-- and that is because such people are not really legalists. While they seek Biblical authority for all they say and do, they understand that we should not use God's revelation to find ways to justify conduct that is clearly contrary to the purposes of God as revealed through Jesus the Incarnate Word or the Scriptures, God's revealed Word. We must understand that the Scriptures are a guide to life, that they equip us for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17), but that there is more to righteousness than slavish holding to the letter of the law (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:4-6). We must also honour God's intentions-- and that will often require us to go "the extra mile" in our service!

It is tragically lamentable that so many in the religious world have used statements regarding the "spirit" over the "letter" of the law, and the idea of "grace" above "law" to justify immoral conduct and a loosening of the guidelines that God has given through His Scriptures. Such represent blatant abuses of what God has said. Such conduct, however, does not justify imbalance on the other side. We are not saved through slavish, strict adherence to the letter of the law; no one can be (cf. Romans 3:20). Nor can we say that our conduct does not matter, or that we can freely neglect parts of what God has revealed-- may it never be (Romans 6:1-23, Colossians 3:17). Let us not be guilty of either legalism or laxity-- let us serve God in Christ, reflecting the image of the Son

Ethan R. Longhenry



Read your Bible daily