



LEGALISM

Compiled by

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I. WHAT IT IS

The term "*legalism*" or "*legalist*" is not found in the Bible, but the serious error of legalism is certainly dealt with, especially by the Apostle Paul who constantly, always, boasted in the cross and championed the grace of God (Gal. 6:14; 1:6).

Galatians 6:14 *"But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."*

Galatians 1:6 *"I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel:"*

Perhaps the best way to see what Paul had to say about how the flesh wrongly uses the law is to read carefully through the epistle to the Galatians.

A. LEGALISM AND JUSTIFICATION

It is the deadly error of legalism that teaches that justification or salvation is by the works of the law. The legalists of Judaea said it this way, *"Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved"* (Acts 15:1b).

Paul clearly confronted this error in **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."*

The law can show us how unjust we are and it can show us our need for justification, but the law can never justify: **Romans 3:20** *"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin."* **Galatians 2:12b** *"...: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain."*

B. LEGALISM AND SANCTIFICATION

The law cannot justify; neither can it sanctify. The law can show us that we are unholy but it can never make us holy. The key to living the Christian life is not found at Mount Sinai, but it is found at Mount Calvary (Romans 6; Gal. 2:20).

Galatians 2:20 *"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."*

Paul argued strongly that the Christian life must be continued on the basis of faith, not on a legal basis: *"This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?"* (**Galatians 3:2-3**). The Christian life is to continue just as it commenced! **Colossians 2:6** *"As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him"* .

Holiness does not come by seeking to keep the law in the energy of the flesh. C.H.Mackintosh defined legality as “*the flesh attempting to carry out the precepts of God.*” How successful is the flesh? The Bible tells us just how successful the flesh is in attempting to carry out the precepts of God: **Romans 7:18** “*For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.*”.

C. THE BELIEVER AND THE LAW

Two key facts must be kept in mind.

First, *the believer is not under the law* (**Romans 6:14** “*For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.*”). In fact the believer has died to the law that he might live unto God (Gal. 2:19; and see Rom. 7:1-6). He is not under the legal rule, but he is under the new creature rule (Gal. 6:15).

Galatians 2:19 “*For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God.*”

Romans 7:1-6 “*Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? 2 For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. 3 So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.*

4 Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God. 5 For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. 6 But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.”

Galatians 6:15 “*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.*”

Second, *the believer is not lawless* (Rom. 6:1-2). We died to the law so that we might be married to Christ, and out of this relationship we bring forth fruit unto God (Rom. 7:4). The life of a true believer should manifest fruitfulness not lawlessness.

Romans 6:1 “*What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? 2 God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?*”

Romans 7:4 “*Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God.*”

Those legalists who try to put themselves under the law do not keep the law (Gal. 6:13; Acts 15:10), but those believers who walk in the Spirit keep the law by way of the fruit of the Spirit: **Romans 8:4** “*That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*” (and compare Galatians 5:22-23).

Galatians 6:13 “*For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh.*”

Acts 15:10 “*Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?*”

Romans 8:4 “*That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*”

II. WHAT LEGALISM IS NOT

1. *Being obedient to God's specific commands is not legalism.* (1 John 2:3-4)

1 John 2:3-4 “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. **4** He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

2. *Living a holy life that is set apart unto the Lord's service is not legalism.* (1 Thessalonians 4:3,7).

1 Thessalonians 4:3 “For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication:”

1 Thessalonians 4:7 “For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.”

3. *Living a life separated unto Christ and separated from the fads and fashions of the world is not legalism.* (Romans 12:2)

Romans 12:2 “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

4. *Conforming one's life to be in harmony with certain standards decided upon by Spirit-led leaders of a local assembly of believers is not legalism.* (Acts 15:29)

Acts 15:29 “That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.”

5. *Forgoing my personal rights for the sake of my brother is not legalism.* (Romans 14:21, 23)

Romans 14:21 “It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.”

Romans 14:23 “And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.”

The following quote about Romans 14:23 is taken from:

KJV Defenders Study Bible, by Dr. Henry Morris, Ph.D.

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“Although all things are, indeed, legal for a true Christian, he will try to do only those things which please his Lord. When he encounters questions not specifically mentioned in Scripture (smoking, movies), he should consider the various Scriptural principles that are given as guideposts to help him make such decisions. One of those is given in this verse, namely, he should be able to do it in full confidence that it is pleasing to Christ.

Some of the principles, with typical supporting Scriptures, may be noted as follows:

(1) *The act has positive value and is, without question, pleasing to the Lord* (Romans 14:23; 1 Corinthians 10:23; Colossians 4:5);

(2) *The act is consistent with our new life in Christ* (Colossians 3:1-4; 2 Timothy 2:4; 2 Corinthians 5:14,15);

(3) *We can sense the positive leading of the indwelling Holy Spirit* (1 Corinthians 6:19,20; Galatians 5:16-18);

(4) *The act will not diminish our Christian influence* (Romans 14:13,21; 1 Corinthians 8:8-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:22);

(5) *The act does not pose a danger of our becoming addicted to it* (1 Corinthians 6:12; Ephesians 5:18; James 1:14,15);

(6) *It can be done consistently with the example set by Jesus* (1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6; Philippians 2:5);

(7) *It can be done in confidence that it brings glory to God* (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:23).

This is certainly not an exhaustive list of relevant principles or appropriate Scriptures, but is at least indicative of what to look for.” (End of quote by **Dr. Henry Morris**)

NOTE THE FOLLOWING:

1. In true **separation** Biblical principles are understood and external standards are implemented.

2. In **legalism** Biblical principles are ignored and external standards are exalted.

3. In **libertinism** (means: a Christian can do *ANYTHING* in the name of LIBERTY) Biblical principles are forgotten and external standards are despised. This third description seems to be where the vast majority of the church is moving today.

The above is a paraphrase of a statement made by Douglas R. McLachlan in the book, "*Reclaiming Authentic Fundamentalism*", American Association of Christian Schools, 1993, page 114.

III. THE BOTTOM LINE

In reality, many people do not really understand the Scriptures when it comes to Biblical separation and Biblical legalism. For instance, many Scriptures are taken out of context by individuals when it comes to the subject of Biblical separation and the subject of legalism. Some people use Acts Chapter 10 to try and prove they are allowed to eat anything, drink anything, and do anything because the Lord told Peter: “*Rise, Peter; kill, and eat.*” (Acts 10:13b) “*What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.*” (Acts 10:15b)

By not comparing Scripture with Scripture it would indeed appear that people can do anything after they are saved because God has cleansed everything for the Christian, making **all things** acceptable in God's sight. If a person takes the time to study what God is trying to show Peter, then there is a clear understanding of Acts Chapter 10. Acts Chapter 10 is not telling a Christian “*anything goes*”. Acts Chapter 10 is speaking about **salvation** for everyone, including the Gentiles (Peter was a Jew). Peter was told to go to the house of Cornelius. Cornelius was a Gentile and for Peter, who was a Jew, it was hard for him to accept the fact that Jesus was not only willing and able to save Jews, He was also willing and able to save Gentiles and all who would call on Him for salvation (Acts 10:36-45).

Acts 10:36-45 *The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (he is Lord of all:) 37 That word, I say, ye know, which was published throughout all Judaea, and began from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached; 38 How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him. 39 And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree: 40 Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly; 41 Not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before God, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead. 42 And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead. 43 To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins. 44 While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. 45 And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the **gift of the Holy Ghost** [salvation].*

(The gift of the Holy Ghost spoken of in Acts 10:45 is salvation.)

CONFUSED?

A “legalist” (some people say) is the person who does not believe the Scripture when it says in **John 8:36** “*If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.*”

Once again, this verse is often taken out of context. The verse is speaking of salvation. We have been set free from the penalties of sin, not from the presence of sin, nor from the ability to sin. There is no such thing as sinless perfection. When a person sins, that is when they place themselves “*back under*” the Law, under the Schoolmaster to learn (Galatians 3:24; Romans 3:20b). Why? It is because, although **we are not saved** by keeping the Ten Commandments, Christians are shown by the Ten Commandments that when we sin, we are to confess our sin (1 John 1:9). When a Christian sins he needs to be taught, once again, that he has broken God's Law. Please remember: God's Law is a reminder not to sin (Romans 3:20b “*for by the law is the knowledge of sin.*”). God's Law is for the lawless, the people who are not willing to follow God's precepts for Christian living as found in the Bible. If you are not following God's precepts for righteous living as a Christian then you are lawless, and have placed yourself back under the Law. Just as civil law is for the lawless, God's Law is for those who break God's Law.

Galatians 3:24 “*Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.*”

No person can be saved by keeping the Ten Commandments or stay saved by keeping the Ten Commandments (**Romans 3:28** *"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."*).

If you are guilty of calling someone a "legalist", please know what a true legalist is. A true legalist is a person who adds to the plan of salvation. In other words, the person who says you are saved by baptism, taking communion, by keeping the Ten Commandments, or any other way of salvation other than the Death, Burial, and Resurrection of our Lord, is a legalist. The person who advocates being different from the world, not partaking in sinful appearances or actions, is not a legalist.

So, before you accuse someone of being a legalist, just because they believe a Christian is to separate himself from all appearances of evil (**1 Thessalonians 5:22** *"Abstain from all appearance of evil."*) look at yourself. Have you placed **YOURSELF** back under the Law because you are a Lawbreaker? Be sure you understand the definition of a word before you use it to accuse someone of doing wrong.