

Defining Legalism for the Christian

There are certain terms or words that seem to come up from time to time in the Christian life for Christians that sometimes we need to look at and give definitions for. Today, we'd like to look at the subject of legalism. What is legalism? 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 was constantly and always boasted in the cross and championed the grace of God.

In Galatians 6:14 it says, *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 says, *I marvel that you 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. Let's look first of all at legalism and justification. It is the deadly error of legalism, that subject, that teaches that justification or salvation is by the works of the law. The legalists of Judea said it this way: *Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved*, Acts 15:1.

Paul clearly confronted this error in Galatians 2:16 where he says, *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.* Well, 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 says, *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 2:12 says, *For if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.*

Legalism and justification... the law cannot justify; neither can it sanctify. The Lord makes this plain in His teachings and so does Paul when he teaches people that they are to live a good Godly Christian life, but he never places somebody back under the law. 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 Chapter 6 speaks of this, and Galatians 2:20 says, *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. He says, *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 says that.

The Christian life is to continue just as it commenced. In Colossians 2:6 it says, *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.

The Bible tells just how successful the flesh is in attempting to carry out the precepts of God.

Romans 7:18 says, *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.*

Then, we need to look at the believer and the law. There are two key facts that must be kept in mind here. First, the believer is not under the law. Romans 6:14 says, *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. Galatians 2:19 says, *For through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God.*

The Christian is not under the legal rule, but he is under the new creature rule. In Galatians 6:15 it says, *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.* People are saved the same way and that is by the faith in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

First, the believer is not under the law and, then, second, the believer is not lawless. We died to the law so that we might be married to Christ, and out of this relationship, we bring forth fruit unto God. In Romans 7:4, it says, *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, according to Galatians 6:13 and 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 says, *That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.* You can also compare Galatians 5:22-23 with this thought.

What legalism is not... Being obedient to God's specific commands is not legalism, according to I John 2:3-4, and we see that living a holy life that is set apart unto the Lord's service is not legalism. First Thessalonians 4:3 and 4:7 talk about this.

And then we see that living a separated life unto Christ and separated from the fads and fashions of the world is not legalism. Romans 12:2 says, *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.*

And then we see 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 speaks of this, and this is the reason that I say it's so important for you to be in a good Bible-believing, Bible-preaching church that teaches the whole counsel of God, not just part of it.

It's great when a pastor or a person stands and gives you the plan of salvation. There's nothing greater than that, than leading a person to Christ. But the whole precept of God not only tells a person how to be saved. That precept that is found in the Word of God... those precepts help a Christian to understand that, now because of salvation, they are to live pleasing to the Lord. They are to strive daily, not to be saved but because they are saved, to please the Lord.

How do you do that? Once again, Romans 12:2 says, *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.*

We look further and we see that forgoing my personal rights for the sake of my brother is

not legalism either. Romans 14:23 says it like this: *And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.*

Now, we see Dr. Henry Morris and we read something by him and he says this about Romans 14:23. He says: "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..., this would be smoking, movies, and so forth, "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." That's Romans 14:23. Dr. Morris goes on and says, "Namely, he should be able to do it...", that's the Christian, "do it in full confidence that it is pleasing to Christ." End of quote by Dr. Henry Morris.

What about the believer and the law? We see that the believer has been set free. The believer is free from the law. The believer is not under the law, and the reason I can say that is because Jesus Christ has set us free, but be careful here, because there are some people who would believe that simply because the Scriptures say that we have been set free, that means that we have been set free from sin.

There is no such thing as sinless perfection in this life. And if we take verses out of context such as John 8:36 where it says, *If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.* That does not say that we're free to do everything we want to do and still look, act, and smell and be like a Christian to this lost and dying world.

We need to have a testimony that says, "I am a Christian. I am on my way to Heaven, and because I'm on my way to Heaven, I want you, too, to go to Heaven. I want you to be able to

say, 'Lord, I have trusted you as my Savior, and one day I will see You in Heaven because I know You by the faith that I have received through the Word of God by trusting Jesus as my Savior.'"

Galatians 3:24 says, *Wherefore, the law was our schoolmaster... That's to the Christian... to bring us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith.* The law is for the lawless. One day, we came to Jesus Christ and we admitted that we were lawbreakers, that we needed salvation, we were sinners, and we said, "Lord, save me. I'm a lawbreaker." Now, you may not have said it that way, but I didn't say it that way. I knew I was a sinner. I knew I was lost. I needed Jesus. Well, the law showed me that I could not keep the Ten Commandments. Well, after I got saved, I understood that I needed a daily cleansing from the Lord because of sin that creeps in.

Now, this is not a world where we escape sin. We are still in the presence of sin. And therefore, when we sin, we in essence are placing ourselves back under the law. Why? Because the law is a schoolmaster to bring us to a point in our lives. Even as Christians, it shows us that we are in need of a cleansing.

First John 1:9 says, *If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* You see, the law is not bad. The law does not save us. The law does not keep us saved, but the law brings us to a point even in the Christian life to let us know that we're not perfect. One day we will be perfect in the Lord because we'll be with Him and then we have no other worries about sin or anything else. We'll be with our Lord.

No person can be saved by keeping the Ten Commandments or stay saved by keeping the Ten Commandments. In Romans 3:28 it says,

Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

Now, 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, 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 or anyone else accuses someone of being a legalist just because they believe a Christian is to separate himself from all appearances of evil, I Thessalonians 5:22, we need to look at ourselves. You need to 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.

We confess our sins. He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If you've never trusted the Lord as Savior, why not do so right now? Ask Him to come into your heart.

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