

Answering The Charge Of Legalism

Introduction. "Legalism" is a term that has become popular in recent years. The word is not found in the Bible but is used as an epithet to generate prejudice against those who insist upon strict obedience to God's word.

Since the word "legalism" is not found in the Bible, we have to use a secular definition. The American Heritage Dictionary defines "legalism" as "Strict, literal adherence to law." So, the question becomes, "Does scripture condemn strict, literal obedience to God's law?"

There was a time that denominational people used "legalist" or "Pharisee" to describe members of the church of Christ because of our insistence upon "book, chapter and verse" for all we teach and practice. Sadly, it is now most often used by our institutional brethren to describe those of us who still insist that all must be done with scriptural authority. The Pharisees were not wrong in their initial approach to the scriptures, but went astray when they encircled God's law with their traditions.

I. **"Proof-Texts" Which Supposedly Condemn Legalism**

A. Romans 2:28-29.

1. The purpose of this passage is not to condemn strict observance to God's law, but to show that salvation is not in keeping the Law of Moses, which required strict observance of every facet of the Law.
2. The term "the letter" is a term that is unique to Paul's writing. We have to understand the term as he intended it to be understood, not as we want it to be understood. Paul is the only New Testament writer who uses the word in a religious sense, and it always refers to the Law of Moses.
3. The fact that man erroneously uses "the letter of the law" to refer to the strict observance of any law, religious or secular, does not effect the meaning Paul intended when he used the term.

B. 2 Corinthians 3:6.

1. It is apparent that "the letter" here also refers to the Old Testament because Paul contrasts it to the "New Testament," that is, the gospel of Christ.
2. The Law of Moses -- "the letter" -- was a law of death because the Jews were required to keep it perfectly, yet none could (Acts 15:10). It could save no one (Hebrews 10:4), and it alienated the majority of mankind -- the Gentiles.
 - a) In Hebrews 10:4, "the blood of bulls and of goats" represents all the sacrifices of the Law of Moses, therefore representing all the Law of Moses.
 - b) In hermeneutics this is known as a synecdoche or a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole. In contrast, "the

spirit" refers to what came by the Holy Spirit -- the gospel of Christ.

3. Those who condemn Christians who believe, teach, and practice strict obedience to the gospel of Christ would have Paul here saying, "If you keep the letter of the law, that is, if you obey every law and principle of the gospel of Christ, it will kill you spiritually; but if you loosely interpret the gospel and obey some of it, it will save you." How ridiculous!

C. Matthew 23:23.

1. Notice that Jesus does not condemn the sacrificing of the smallest herbs; rather, He encourages it by saying "this ye ought to have done." He condemns the Pharisees for leaving undone other laws of God that were equally binding: practicing justice, mercy and faith. Jesus called these "weightier," or more important, matters of the law.
2. Those who condemn what they call "legalism" do not seem to realize that Jesus actually commands what they call legalism -- strict adherence to law.

II. ***The Word Of God Actually Demands What Some Call "Legalism"***

- A. Far from condemning "strict, literal adherence to law," scripture actually demands it.

1. John 8:30-32.

- a) The term "word" is a singular of class; it refers to all that Jesus commands through His word.
- b) If we do not have to abide in all that Jesus commands, how do we determine what we have to obey and what we can leave undone?

2. John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 John 5:2-3; 2 John 6.

- a) All these have reference to our love toward Jesus Christ and God. However, notice very carefully that our obedience is dependent upon our love.
- b) The idea is that if we love God, we are to keep commandments. Therefore, "legalism" and love actually coexist rather than being polar opposites of each other!

- B. The Holy Spirit, through the writers of the New Testament, demands "strict, literal adherence to law," or what some call "legalism."

1. Galatians 1:10.

- a) Paul asks the rhetorical question, "Am I trying to get men to emend their lives to God's ideal, or am I trying to get God to accept men as they are?"

- b) Those who want to do less than God demands are trying to do what Paul said we should not do -- get God to accept less than what He has commanded.
2. James 2:10.
 - a) James was making the point that partiality is a sin. If one is doing well in other areas of obedience, this does not make up for the sins of which one is guilty.
 - b) So James is teaching that the New Testament is indeed law (cf. Hebrews 8:10), and a violation of that law is sin (1 John 3:4). Therefore, in order to be righteous, we must obey God's commandments (cf. Luke 1:6).
 3. James 2:18.
 - a) "Works" refers to doing what God has commanded (cf. "deed," Colossians 3:17; "deeds," Romans 2:6; "doing," Galatians 6:9; "labor," 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:12).
 - b) Since doing what God has commanded shows our faith, doing less than all God has commanded demonstrates less than perfect faith.
 4. 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9.
 - a) Notice that there is an implied link between "knowing God" and "obeying not the gospel." So one who "knows" Him will want to "obey" Him.
 - b) If "obey not the gospel" allows us to do some parts commanded in the gospel and leave other parts undone, how do we know which commandments are optional?
 5. Acts 10:33.
 - a) If God does not demand full and complete obedience to everything He has commanded, why did Peter say it was necessary for Cornelius and his family and friends to hear "all things that are commanded thee of God?"
 - b) Why did not Peter just tell them to do what they thought best? Apparently, Peter was a legalist.
 6. Luke 17:10.
 - a) If doing "all those things which you are commanded" still leaves us "unprofitable servants" what can be said of those who do less than they are commanded?
 - b) Jesus is here saying that, even though we keep His word completely and fully, we still have not earned salvation; it is still a matter of grace (Ephesians 2:8).

Conclusion. Man has given a prejudicial meaning to the word "legalism" to mock people who insist on doing all God has commanded. In so doing, he feels justified in doing less than is required. No matter what man

may say, the word of God remains sure and unchanging (Revelation 22:14; Romans 3:4; 1 Peter 2:23).