

LEGALISM VERSUS BIBLICAL OBEDIENCE

Legalism is following a set of "man-made" rules and regulations in an effort to please God. Often, legalism is wrongly defined. Biblical holiness is not legalism. The Lordship of Christ is not legalism. Keeping the commandments of God in keeping with the New Covenant is not legalism (cf. 1 Jn. 2:3). Loving God obediently is not legalism (cf. Jn. 14:15; 1 Cor. 8:3). Properly applied wisdom principles are not legalism (cf. Proverbs).

Legalism is LAW-centered instead of LORD-centered! Legalism is man-centered instead of God-centered. Legalism is works-centered instead of grace-centered (give me a list). Legalism is flesh-centered instead of Spirit-centered.

Legalism not only emphasizes extra-biblical rules and regulations but also carries with it a harsh TONE that says you better live by "my" prescribed code or else. Jesus had more trouble with religious legalists than with anyone else. Paul had more trouble with religious legalists than with anyone else.

Being "sheep," people are attracted to various forms of "legalism". It seems so spiritual, but in reality, it is DEADLY! There are two basic forms of "legalism" addressed in the New Testament. Both are addressed in the book of Galatians. There is a DEADLY legalism related to salvation. Those who add ANYTHING to GRACE (God's unmerited favor) commit this error. Paul addressed this error in Galatians 1 contrasting the true gospel ("the grace of Christ" - the finished work of Christ on the cross) with a "different gospel" (Gal. 1:6). The TRUE gospel is a gospel of GRACE (cf. Gal. 2:21). "Jesus paid it ALL – ALL to Him we owe!" G.R.A.C.E. is "God's Riches At Christ's Expense". Paul denounced any false LEGALISTIC "gospel" in the strongest of terms:

Galatians 1:8–9 (NKJV)

8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.

9 As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

There is also a "legalism" related to sanctification. There are those who agree with salvation by grace, but then want to make sanctification (Christian living) about man-made rules and regulations. This is "deadening" in terms of bearing spiritual fruit. Paul addressed this in Galatians 3 and 5.

Galatians 3:3 (NKJV)

3 Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?

Galatians 5:1 (NKJV)

1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

Even Christians who are trophies of GRACE often tend to get bogged down in a legalistic "yoke of bondage" in matters of sanctification.

Legalistic teachers abound who claim to speak with authority and who want to order your life according to THEIR extra-biblical rules and regulations. That is a spiritual "killer"! As true believers in Christ we live under one great guiding reality and that is the LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST.

Everything falls under this reality. No one else is "Lord". Jesus ALONE is our LORD. He ALONE speaks with ultimate authority over our lives. He ALONE orders our lives according to His commandments. He has given us two great "guard rail" TRUTHS. One is LOVE (defined by Him), and the other is HOLINESS (a life separated unto Him). And He has given us the Spirit to guide and direct us in keeping with new covenant truth and the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:22-23). Between those two guard rails there is a lot of working out your own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). Jesus is LORD and the Spirit is our GUIDE in keeping with new covenant truth. And this reality is ALL-SUFFICIENT for godly living (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:3-4).

Yes, God has gifted the body and given teachers and leaders to the church, but faithful leadership continually points to Christ and His commandments and not to flesh-oriented legalism. Legalism is having someone else be your "lord". Biblical Christianity is having Jesus ALONE be Lord! Godly leadership emphasizes "It's all about JESUS!" Before God, everyone is responsible to do their own thinking, their own living, and will give their own accounting. For believers, there is but "one Lord" (cf. Eph. 4:5). Our Lord has so designed the body that there is mutual dependence and mutual accountability, yet there ever remains only ONE LORD! "IT'S ALL ABOUT HIM!"

However, to truly know Jesus is a life-changing reality which is not to be confused with "legalism". A changed life that conforms to biblical holiness is not legalism. Jesus said, "every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit." (Matt. 7:17). Paul spoke of those who "profess to know

God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.” (Titus 1:16) Paul championed grace but he also said those who practice the works of the flesh “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:19-21).

In contrast to the lost, those who belong to Christ “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” and are therefore exhorted to live accordingly (Gal. 5:24-25).

As those saved by grace we now have a new MASTER. The Law of Moses is no longer our master but rather the living LORD! Allegiance to Christ now governs the life! He truly is our LORD and SAVIOR!