

# The Doctrine of Legalism

- I. Definition and Preliminary Considerations – Legalism is the addition of traditions-of-men, restrictions, or commandments to the Word of God, elevating them to equal or greater authority than His Word.
- A) Legalism is a present day term coined to define the concept of adding to the Word of God. cp Gen 3:3
  - B) The Bible makes it clear that God’s word as recorded in the canon of Scripture is God-breathed (2Tim.3:16), hence perfect and therefore all sufficient as it stands unaltered, in providing man with insight and knowledge as to the POG. Psa.19:7 *“The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.”* also cp Jam.1:25
  - C) God warned the Jews in the giving of the Law not to stray to the right nor to the left of His words. Deu.5:32, 17:11,20, 28:14 *“and do not turn aside from any of the words which I command you today, to the right or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.”*
  - D) To stray or turn aside to the right is equivalent to adding to the Word of God (legalism), while going left is synonymous to omission of His words (liberalism). Deu.4:2 *“You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.”*
  - E) God’s word is sovereign, and to add to or take away from it is tantamount to usurping His authority and destroys the integrity and intent of Bible Doctrine (BD). Mk 7:5-13
  - F) God’s warning to the Jews points to the two fallacious approaches of legalism and liberalism in the teaching, understanding and application of the Christian Way of Life.
  - G) To enter into either fallacious realm destroys the balance of perfection that God has so passed on to mankind through His Word.
  - H) It is the responsibility of all communicators to seek the entire counsel of BD, under God’s designed system for communication, to avoid teaching something that is not Biblically substantiated, or omitting any increments of truth. Act.20:26-27 *“Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.”*
  - I) In so doing, the communicator ensures that God’s Word maintains its integrity of balance for the exhortation and edification of those allotted to his charge. cp 1Pet 5:2 *“shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God...”* (*“THE WILL OF’ IS SUPPLIED AND NOT NECESSARY*)
- II. Legalism and Religiosity.
- A) To approach the Bible either from a legalistic or liberal standpoint is to destroy the true concept of Christianity and in effect produces a man-made religious approach to God.
  - B) True Christianity seeks to develop a relationship with God based on His terms and conditions, while religion incorporates man’s terms and conditions (in whatever form they may take), and seeks to coerce God into acceptance of them.
  - C) The Jews provide a Biblical observation as to those that historically have strayed both to the right and left of BD.

- D) Israel corporately has undergone two dispersions from the land.
- E) The first dispersion of a two-fold part (721 and 586 BC) was due to their failure to maintain their moral integrity of the Law. Jer 16:10-13
- F) The Jews became liberal in their approach to the Law and dismissed the necessity of commandments that called for refraining from immorality and separation from cults that promoted such. Jer 25:4-9
- G) The consequence was a dispersion of Israel from the land for 70 years. Jer 25:11  
*“And this whole land shall be a desolation and a horror, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.”*
- H) By the time of the Gospel era and the Incarnation, Israel had developed a whole different approach to God’s Word – they had taken the Law and added to it a “hedge” of additional manmade laws as a reaction to their previous moral failings.
- I) This legalistic approach resulted in a system of religion that produced an extreme example of legalism and its consequences. Mk 7:3-4
- J) The end result was that they did not look at Christ through faith as their means of salvation, but rather to themselves and their works. Ac 15:1, 5
- K) Because Christ did not fit their “mold” of legalistic religiosity, which obviously distorted what they were looking for in a Messiah, they murdered Jesus. Mk 14:55  
*“Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, and they were not finding any.”*
- L) Jesus’ warning to His disciples of the hostility and hatred of –V included the religious legalists as the primary source of persecution they could expect. Lk 21:12; Jn 15:18-25 (note that “they” in vs 20-25 = “the Jews”)
- M) Due to an adherence to this type of religious reversionism they became a people totally antagonistic to the spiritual truths of the Word, and God once again removed Israel from the land in 70 AD.
- N) The irony that can’t be missed, contrary to how most Christians regard the consequences of sin, is that it was this system of legalism that produced the gravest condemnation upon Israel, as they were removed from the land for some 1878 years.
- O) While straying to the left, Israel brought condemnation upon herself for immorality; when she strayed to the right, the Law and its legalistic interpretation became her god, rather than its Author.

### III. Observations of Legalism During the Ministry of Christ.

- A) The Gospels make clear that it was the Pharisaic sect of Judaism that was the predominate influence and enforcers of this legalistic religion. Mt 23:2  
*“...The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses.”*
- B) They are seen as the main contributors to the persecution and harassment of Jesus during His ministry. Mk 3:6  
*“And the Pharisees went out and immediately began taking counsel with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.”*
- C) Jesus made it clear to His disciples to beware of this insidious tact to distort BD. Mt 16:6-12
- D) The principle is that a little leaven ruins the whole lump of dough, including the addition of a “little” legalism into the Word of God. Gal 5:9
- E) Under this system of religiosity, the Jews developed a compatible sister to legalism called “the traditions of men”. Mk 7:1-13

- F) Legalism produces a form of self-righteousness, vanity before God. Mk 7:6-7 cp Mt 5:20 *“for I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*
- G) When one seeks to enforce these man made traditions, the consequence always results in disobedience to true principles of BD. Mk 7:9 *“You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.”*
- H) It in effect destroys the very intent of the principle of BD that their legalism is directly attached to – it forces the individual to stray to the left regarding other doctrines such as justice (impartiality/fairness), mercy (compassion/grace), and faithfulness (integrity of intent). Mt 23:23
- I) The Pharisees reflect certain characteristics that can be seen today in those that have legalistic trends and operate accordingly:
- 1) They think better of themselves, reflecting a condescending and arrogant attitude towards others – a form of building one’s righteousness upon the perceived unrighteousness of others (real or not). Jn 7:45-49
  - 2) In turn, they take issue with any type of association with others that do not meet their arrogant standards of self-righteousness, abusing the Doctrine of Separation and killing the intended impact of the witness of the life towards potential +V. Mt 9:11-13
  - 3) They try to weave nets of suspicion upon others that engage in the liberties of the Christian life, without Biblical substantiation. cp Jesus’ observance of the Sabbath. Mt 12:1-8; Jn 5-18
  - 4) In other words, they call things “sin” with no Biblical basis or they insinuate sin upon others when they have no collaborating evidence Biblically or factually. Lk 7:31-35
  - 5) They step outside their limits of authority in intrusion upon other’s rights, e.g. the excommunication of the man born blind without any Biblical mandate to do so – Jn 9:34
  - 6) In thinking more highly of themselves, they self-exalt themselves over the common layman. Mt 23:2, 6-7
  - 7) In reality they are hypocritical since their approach to the Plan of God stymies spiritual advancement. cp Mt 23:13 *“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.”*
  - 8) They feed on others with legalistic trends and weak in grace, seeking to conform them into their own mold of legalism. cp Mt 23:15 *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.”*
  - 9) On the other hand, they overlook failures of those that have their own STA weaknesses, and ignore their own areas of sin. Mt 23:24 *“You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”*
  - 10) They meddle in other’s private affairs, which is equated with overt sins of the highest magnitude. 1Pet 4:15 *“By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler”*
  - 11) They scrutinize the conduct of others, waiting for a chance to make accusation as to one’s exercise of liberty in God’s plan. Lk 6:7 *“And the scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely, to see if He healed on the Sabbath, in order that they might find reason to accuse Him.”*

- 12) They instill fear of man rather than a true fear of God. cp Jn 9:22 *“His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed, that if anyone should confess Him to be Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue.”*
- 13) They place unreasonable expectations upon others for obedience when they themselves won’t deal with their own sin. Mat.23:4 *“And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.”* cp Gal 6:13
- J) It was toward the religious leaders under this system of legalism that both Jesus and John the Baptism showed the least tolerance during their ministries. Mt 3:7 cp Mt 23:33

#### IV. Legalism and Grace.

- A) It is totally incompatible with grace and is anti-grace orientated. Gal 2:21 *“I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.”*
- B) Grace is the underwriter of God’s plan. Col.1:3-6
- C) Salvation Ph<sub>1</sub> is a grace provision provided by God. Tit 2:11 *“for the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men.”*
- D) Grace denotes that salvation is a non-meritorious proposition and is not dependent upon man, but God. Rom 6:23 *“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*
- E) Therefore, the SAJG is a faith proposition minus works. Eph 2:8-9
- F) Legalism adds to Ph<sub>1</sub> saving faith a form of works, and adds requirements to Ph<sub>2</sub> justification by faith.
- G) There is a place for works in the Christian life, that being the application of BD in Ph<sub>2</sub>. Js 2:17 *“Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”*
- H) However, even one’s Ph<sub>2</sub> remains a grace proposition – 2Pet 3:18 *“...grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...”* – a mandate for the tandem application of both grace and knowledge of BD in the believer’s spiritual growth.
- I) It is grace that is the antidote for the infiltration of legalism and knowledge that is the antidote for any omission of BD.
- J) It is by grace that one can have experiential fellowship with God (1Jn 1:9), it is by grace that God communicates BD to us (Eph 4:7,11-13) and it is by grace that we have all the Divine operating assets necessary to apply BD (Eph 3:7).
- K) With knowledge of BD we learn the Plan of God and what constitutes sin vs. the freedoms we are to be allowed under the Plan of God.
- L) While grace does not condone sin, it accepts sin as a reality in the Christian’s life and has made all the provision necessary for one to overcome their sin in the life to make the MAJG. cp 1Jn 2:1 *“My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous”*
- M) Legalism supplants the grace of God in the Christian life with its own brand of self-righteousness and seeks to destroy the very liberties of God’s Plan bestowed upon believers. cp Gal 2:3-4
- N) Legalism attacks the power of Rb, the freedom of volition, dares to read the intent of one’s heart, and seeks to impose man’s relative righteousness over the true righteousness that comes from application of BD in FHS based upon one’s freedom of choice.

- V. Concluding observations.
- A) Legalism usurps the Sovereign authority of BD.
  - B) It transplants the authority of God with the authority of men.
  - C) The truth of BD provides true freedom in the Christian life (Jn 8:31-32), while legalism robs believers of their freedoms.
  - D) Legalism is rampant in the church today – Denominationalism steeped in the traditions of men is the primary evidence of this fact.
  - E) Due to the consequence of legalism and its effect of a liberal approach to the spiritual realities of BD, the Church is in a “lukewarm” state primed to be vomited from the mouth of God. Rev 3:16
  - F) Legalism (as well as liberalism) is a constant danger in our thinking and applications of BD.
  - G) Legalism sets the stage for unjust evaluations and criticisms of others based on appearance alone, and violates the mandate of the Word of God’s on how we are to judge. Jn 7:24 *“Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.”*
  - H) We must all strive to maintain the proper balance of grace and knowledge.
    - 1) Grace without knowledge leads to misapplication. cp 1Cor 5:6 *“Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?”*
    - 2) Knowledge without grace only leads to arrogance. 1Cor 8:1 *“...we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.”*
  - I) While there will always be those who have legalistic trends, believers that have the balance of grace are to continue to apply, even towards those who are, in fact, legalistic.
  - J) Legalism can be attached to any doctrine or principle of doctrine and it is incumbent upon the P-T to ensure this leaven does not creep in, whether in their own teaching or in the attitudes of his listeners.

**It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.**

**Gal 5:1**

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