
BIBLE TALK

This week the question is: **What is "legalism"? Is it wrong? Are we guilty of it?**

WHAT IT IS NOT

Legalism is indeed wrong and sinful and many people are guilty of being legalists without even knowing it. In fact, many who are outspoken and decry legalism are in fact themselves guilty of it.

To understand what legalism is, it will help if we begin by discussing what it is not.

(1) Legalism is not keeping God's commandments.

If legalism is keeping God's commandments, then Jesus was a legalist because He kept the Father's commandments and he kept them perfectly.

John 8:29

29 ... The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him."

John 6:38

38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.

Jesus was not a legalist, but He kept all of the Father's commandments and He kept them perfectly. So legalism is not keeping God's commandments.

1 John 3:7

7 Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.

"Practicing righteousness," according to Psalms 119:172 means keeping God's commandments. "Let no one deceive you," the apostle said, "he who practices righteousness – keeps the commandments of God – he is the one who is righteous." When anyone from any denomination teaches that you can be righteous without keeping God's commands, just remember what the apostle said here, "Let no one deceive you: he who practices righteousness is righteous, just as he is righteous."

(2) Legalism is not preaching to others that God's commandments must be kept.

If legalism is preaching that men must keep God's commandments, then all the apostles and prophets were legalists, because they preached that men must obey the Lord!

Jeremiah 35:14-15

14 ... [God said, The sons of Jonadab] obey their father's commandment. But although I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, you did not obey Me.

15 I have also sent to you all My servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them, saying, 'Turn now everyone from his evil way, amend your doings, and do not go after other gods to serve them; then you will dwell in the land which I have given you and your fathers.' But you have not inclined your ear, nor obeyed Me.

According to this God sent all the prophets to plead with the people to come back in obedience to the commandments of God. If legalism means preaching that people must obey God's commands, then all of the prophets were legalists because that's what they all preached. We know, however, that the prophets and apostles were not legalists, so we know that what they preached was not legalism.

WHAT LEGALISM IS

What, then, is legalism if it is not keeping the commandments of God and if it is not preaching to others that they must keep the commandments of God? What is it?

Legalism, according to the Bible, is someone who is depending on their ability to keep the law rather than depending upon God. Legalism is not law-keeping, but pride and arrogance in one's accomplishments with the law. It is an attitude. Legalism is someone who becomes so proud of themselves, someone who becomes so puffed up and haughty, that they begin to think they deserve heaven.

In the Bible we are instructed by Jesus to keep every single commandment that God gave, but we are also instructed to keep a humble attitude and remember that we are undeserving. Take this for an example of what I mean:

Deuteronomy 8:11-18

11 "Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today,
12 lest — when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them;

13 and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied;

14 when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage;

17 then you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.'

18 "And you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

Do you see the point of this passage. Turn to Deuteronomy 8 and read the entire chapter after you hang up and you will learn what legalism is. Legalism is not working, it's not someone keeping God's commandments, but it's thinking. It's someone thinking that they, with their own power and with their own might have saved themselves because they are so good and have keep God's commandments so perfectly.

Instead of becoming haughty and proud, we must keep all of God's commandments, including baptism, but we must keep the right attitude. After we have kept all of God's commandments, we must then humbly admit that God does not owe us a thing. He is not indebted to us in the slightest. Even after we have keep all of His commandments, we are still undeserving of heaven.

Luke 17:7-10

7 And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'?

8 But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'?

9 Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not.

10 So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'

Do you see the point here? It's not necessary for the master to "thank" the slave for keeping a commandment! The slave must do what the master commandments, but he is not deserving of any special praise because he has only done what was commanded!

Legalism is someone who becomes haughty and begins to think that they are deserving of praise from God. The Pharisees were legalists and felt that God owed them special praise.

Luke 18:11-12

11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men — extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.

12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

This is legalism. This is a man who is depending upon his accomplishments with the law rather than upon God. This is a man who thinks he is really good enough to go to heaven because of how good he has been. Legalism is a haughty attitude.

Is there anything wrong with giving tithes? No. Is there anything wrong with fasting? No. Is it wrong to preach to others that they should tithe, or fast? No. What then was the problem? The problem was the man's attitude. He proudly viewed himself as being deserving and worthy of special praise from God. He proudly imagined that God owed him salvation.

APPLICATION

Unfortunately, many people, without realizing it, are legalists. For example, when we preach to people that they must believe and be baptized to be saved (Mark 16:16) it is common to hear something like this:

"Are you saying men must be baptized in water to be saved and if they don't they can't go to heaven? Are you saying my good old grannie who went to church every Sunday and read her Bible every day and asked the Lord to save her ... are you saying she's lost just because she didn't get baptized in water?"

Do you see the point behind this reasoning? This person is arguing that his grannie is so good that she deserves to go to heaven. She was so good that she didn't need baptism to wash away her sins. She was so good that she didn't need to keep the Lord's command to be baptized! Now, my friend, that's legalism; that what the Lord condemns! It is wrong, and unfortunately, many people who think they're against legalism are in fact guilty of it themselves.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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