

Legalism

By David de Bruyn

It has to be one of the most frequently used words in the modern church. It does not take long for someone somewhere to accuse a church or a church leader of this now-dreaded word. It is out of fear of being accused of being this way that many churches water down their standards. It is the word: Legalism.

You hear it said, 'That church is rather legalistic' or 'that pastor is rather legalistic.' It has become something of a smear-word in Christian circles, rather like saying that church is rather greedy, or that church is rather cruel. Once the title legalistic is written over your church or your ministry, it seems you are blacklisted, at least in the minds of those who believe such an accusation.

But what is legalism? Is there an example of legalism in the Bible? How are we guilty of legalism today? And what do people mean when they call someone or some church legalistic? Well, legalism means what it suggests. Legal is something in accord with the law, so legalism is strict adherence to the Law, or being a stickler for keeping the Law.

Now legalism really has two meanings or expressions, both of which we find in Scripture, and both of which are around today.

The first kind of legalist you might call a soteriological legalist. That is, their legalism affects their view of salvation – which is what soteriology refers to. This kind of legalism believes that salvation is by grace plus works. They believe keeping the Law completes the work of salvation. They suggest overtly or subtly that keeping the Law is what secures or completes your salvation. The Biblical example of this is the Galatians.

The Galatians had been listening to a group of legalists who taught that salvation through faith in Christ was not enough if a person had not been physically circumcised. They taught that only the incorporation of certain Jewish rituals could make sure someone is saved. Paul wrote the entire book of Galatians to counter this heresy and teach them to walk in the Spirit.

Again and again, we read Paul condemning the heresy on logical and theological grounds. He says in **Galatians 1:6**: *"I marvel that ye are so soon removed from Him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel."* That's how seriously Paul regarded this kind of legalism. It is not just another doctrine; it announces an altogether different message of how man must be reconciled to God. It is not good news at all, therefore, it is not the gospel.

Such legalists are still with us today. There are many cults and heretical groups that are heirs to the Galatians. They insist that if you truly repent and receive Jesus Christ as Lord, it is not enough. There must still be another ritual you undergo, another ceremony to partake of, another ordinance or sacrament that you must receive to complete or confirm your standing in heaven.

But **1 Peter 1:4** speaks of “*an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you.*” How can something be reserved for you if it is conditional upon your works, upon receiving some extra act, upon observing a particular day, upon attending a particular service? No, it can only be reserved if it is based upon what God has done – that’s what grace means. God does the work, for His glory. Paul tried to teach this:

O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? 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 3:1-3

Paul was saying if God did this supernatural work of salvation in you, do you somehow hope to complete His miracle with your human, natural ways? What God authored, God will finish. Paul also tried to teach them that the point of the Law was not to provide righteousness, but to show them their helplessness to please God, and drive them in faith to Christ – the ultimate way of pleasing God.

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.

Galatians 3:24-25

No work, not even wonderful things like baptism and the Lord’s Supper, can provide salvation. Paul said, “*I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain*” (**Galatians 2:21**). To put it another way – if there was some other thing you could do to merit salvation, why did God give up His precious Son to die on a cross for us?

God could certainly command us to simply do that work which would earn us our salvation. But we know that there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation, and there is nothing we can do to keep our salvation. **1 Peter 1:5** speaks of believers as those “*who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*”

If God just got the ball rolling, but expected us to maintain our salvation, then the glory would be shared – partially God’s, and partially man’s. But it is not so. Paul ends his treatment of God’s incredible grace in **Romans 11:36** by saying: “*For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.*”

On the other hand, we must add, true believers will show evidence of their salvation by bearing fruit. That fruit-bearing is not a condition to remain saved. It is evidence that they are. If someone seems to make a profession of faith and later denies Christ, they are like the plant Jesus described that grows up quickly but has no root, or that grows up and is choked by the world and riches and pleasures. They are not truly saved.

But this persevering to the end is not the means by which we purchase or obtain salvation. It is the means by which we gain assurance that we certainly do belong to Him – because He is keeping us on track. **Jude 24-25** says: “*Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to*

present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen."

Certainly, to be guilty of this kind of legalism is to be guilty of corrupting the Gospel itself. We need to combat this kind of legalism by preaching it loud and clear: the gospel is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

But there is a second kind of legalism. We might call this sanctification legalism. This kind refers more to the process of spiritual growth. It might believe that salvation is all by grace through faith, but ironically, it believes that sanctification, the process of spiritual growth, is no longer by grace through faith. It might not always say that in those words, but in practice, the belief becomes clear – growth into the image of Christ comes through adhering to certain rules.

Again, we have a Biblical example. The legalists of this type were the Pharisees. It is likely many of them were legalists in the area of salvation too, but the Gospel focuses on their practical acts of legalism. The Pharisees were specialists in externals. They took the Law of Moses and began to expand on it. When there was a command forbidding that a man be given more than 40 stripes with a whip, they made sure they always did 39, just to make sure.

The Pharisees added and added to the Law till it had become a system of bondage that no man could bear. Indeed, Jesus said of them, *"For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers"* (**Matthew 23:4**). In fact, their system was so rigorous that at the time of Christ, there were no more than 6000 Pharisees. It had become an elite group, mostly because many people just felt they could never live the way the Pharisees lived.

But the truth of the matter was that the Pharisees, with a few exceptions, were externalists. They were not concerned with true spirituality which occurs by grace through faith, and is very often a hidden thing. Instead, they liked to give loud prayers in the marketplace, very clear evidence of their fasting, and to trumpet their giving. Religion was their game, and they wanted all to know that they were experts at it. They truly were legal-lists – masters of the Law.

But the Pharisees were doing two things which make up the heart of practical legalism. Firstly, they did what they did for the approval of man. Their righteousness had to be done in terms of measurable external acts, because it was men they were doing it for. Jesus said, *"But all their works they do for to be seen of men"* (**Matthew 23:5**) and in **John 5:44**, He said to them: *"How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?"*

Indeed, their objection to Jesus was essentially about power – about popularity with men. They wished to maintain the status they had in the eyes of the Jews as the strictest of the strict, and therefore the most devout Jews. When Jesus came, preaching a message of heart repentance and faith in Himself as the Messiah, they knew it would mean the end of their rule and status. They hated Him for exposing their hypocrisy and externalism. They hated Him because people loved Jesus and followed Him.

The second thing the Pharisees did which makes up the heart of practical legalism is that they saw their works as meritorious in themselves. In other words, they saw the things that they were doing as righteousness itself. Tithing even the smallest items, like mint seeds, forbidding even healing being done on the Sabbath – they saw these acts as the essence of righteousness itself.

But the Biblical view, and the view that Jesus taught, was that God cleanses you and gives you righteousness. Your good works then become evidence of the inward righteousness of the heart, not the actual means of producing righteousness. Certainly, obedience sanctifies us, but only because we are obedient to the Sanctifier Himself – God the Holy Spirit.

The Pharisees saw their adherence to their man-made laws as the very essence and form of being righteous. And since they thought the actual acts they did were the embodiment of righteousness, they sought to be as strict and extreme as possible regarding those acts. If righteousness comes by the Law, then certainly – take your law-keeping to the nth degree. Jesus hammered on this a number of times.

For example, told the flabbergasted Jews in **Matthew 5:20**: *“For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of Heaven.”* He was saying that entering Heaven requires God’s righteousness in Christ, not the man-made externalism of the Pharisees – no matter how devout it was. His whole Sermon on the Mount keeps drilling down below the letter of the Law to its spirit. He rebuked the Pharisees this way:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

Matthew 23:25-28

The Pharisees had forgotten what the Old Testament taught – it was up to God to circumcise the heart, so that you could love Him. This is righteousness: treating God as He is. They had enshrined the Law as an end in itself, not as a means to an end, which is to further know and experience God. The more they focused on externals, the more they lost the big picture. They majored on the minors and minored on the majors. And Jesus said to them:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain [out] a gnat, and swallow a camel.

Matthew 23:23-24

More than once, Jesus told the Pharisees, “Go and learn what this means – I will have mercy and not sacrifice” (**Matthew 9:13**). This quotation refers to God’s desire for a right relationship rather than rituals as an end in itself. He tried to teach them that their problems, and hence their solution, was their internal state, not their external state: *“There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man”* (**Mark 7:15**).

Such legalism is unfortunately still alive and well today. It exists among orthodox Christians who teach that Jesus is the sinless Son of God, and that salvation is by grace through faith in Him alone. But what begins to enter is this form of practical legalism. Soon, manmade rules are added to Biblical principles.

Keeping these manmade rules will mean you gain the approval of others. Either through extra approval and reward for keeping the standard, or by a loss of warmth and fellowship if you don’t – the desire for the approval of others drives people to conform.

This kind of legalism can even happen through outright intimidation and fear – but soon, people are judging what they do, not by God’s standard, but by what everyone else in the group is doing. Pretty soon, we develop our circles of fellowship, and we exclude those who don’t conform to these rules.

Likewise, there is also the thinking that doing these things is meritorious in itself. The thinking starts to develop that when you are *really* spiritual, you hold this kind of conviction or standard. If you *really* want God to bless you, or to have a sense of intimacy in your quiet times, you need to do these things. If you don’t, God just won’t love you as much.

Instead of the focus being on our own walk with God, our own submission to Him in the Word of God, and the richness of our prayer times, our focus shifts to how much we are conforming to the rules established by the group we are in. I have seen how in a legalistic situation, people who are involved in gross perversions in their personal lives, who have almost no personal devotional lives – do not feel convicted simply because they are keeping the man-made standards.

Such people have the approval of their leader, and that is enough for them. Truly, they become clean outwardly, but inwardly are full of dead men’s bones. The external acts – which of course are manmade – and therefore possible to keep in our flesh, become the standard of measuring spirituality.

But the question then becomes, what are these standards or rules that people idolise which become legalism? Well, here is where the confusion often comes in. Let us take a moment to say what legalism is not.

Legalism is not having rules or standards. I cannot count how many times I have heard a believer say: ‘That church is legalistic.’ What they were really saying though is, that church has rules. And sadly, our Christianity has become so anaemic that any mention of rules to a modern, lukewarm Christian brings forth the charge of legalism. Rules are not legalism.

If a parent says to a child, "You must be in bed by 8:30 pm", would we say, "What legalism! Oh, how terrible of those parents to bring those children into the bondage of observing times, instead of allowing them the freedom in Christ to go to bed whenever they want to!" Of course not. But that is exactly what we do in Christianity. A church sets a standard based on a Biblical principle, and people cry 'legalism.'

In the same way, a church may set a manmade standard without being legalistic. A standard is simply a guideline to help believers. It is like the guard rails we have on our highways. They help us navigate and avoid accidents. They are like the training wheels on bicycles. They teach us to ride till we have balance – that is – till we are consistently submitting to the Holy Spirit on our own.

When those children get older, they will have the freedom to go to bed without being told when. That will only be because they have hopefully, by then, learned a sense of self-discipline regarding their bodies and rest. You could say that they now have freedom to do what is best. Even if, at age 20, they consistently go to bed after midnight – we would not rejoice in their freedom, we would lament their lack of discipline.

What will make the rules or standards legalistic is if they are presented in a way that usurps the place of the Holy Spirit. The legalism is not so much the rule as it is the way that rule is presented. If the rule is presented not as a means of righteousness but as an aid to learning God's ways for yourself, then it is not legalism.

For example, one church might teach that total abstinence from alcohol is biblical. Another church, down the road, insists that you must have one glass of wine every day to truly be a spiritual Christian. Now, in that case, the church with the apparently 'stricter' rule is not legalistic, so long as it simply presents what it believes as a Biblical case for total abstinence, and does not make out like that practice makes you super-spiritual in itself.

The other church though, even though its rule is not as strict, has become legalistic, by making the rule itself a means of finding favour with God, of being accepted by the group. The issue is not often in the strictness of the rule, as it is in the underlying philosophy of having such rules. Legalism is not the having or keeping of strict standards – someone can have very loose standards, but be legalistic about them.

Legalism is not the having or keeping of standards – rules are biblical. The Bible is full of rules. Very often a person who cries legalism, upon investigation, turns out to be a person who has a fundamental problem with submission to God. They dislike authority. They do not want to submit to God, so they exist in the stupor of their own self-righteousness.

When, for a moment, the water of reality is splashed on their faces by encountering a church with standards – they cry legalism. What they are really crying is: "Authority!" Christian liberty is freedom to enjoy service to Christ. Our problem is that we define legalism as the opposite to a warped form of Christian liberty. So with that false view of Christian liberty, we then see anything different from that licentious way as legalism.

It's an indictment on the spiritual state of the modern church that we are more concerned about excessive adherence to standards than we are about a lack of standards. It seems to the modern Christian that erring on the side of trying to promote holiness is a greater sin than erring on the side of being permissive. Even having a man-made standard is not legalism, so long as the standard does not take the place of loving God.

Of course, there are rules that become ridiculous and lay burdens upon people, like the Pharisees did. These ought to be rejected. Legalism is when a conviction or standard of external behaviour is exalted as a means of closer fellowship with God, of more approval by Him, and hence with others in the group that follow this thinking.

Such legalism can be about things like dress, foods, celebrating or observing certain days, leisure activities. It can even be the application of a Biblical rule – like church attendance in a way which seems to make that outward act – the very thing that admits us into the inner circle of fellowship with God and others.

This kind of legalism must be fought with an understanding of biblical righteousness. Our righteousness never comes from ourselves. We do not create our righteousness. God gives us His righteousness, and then calls us to continually submit to Him to allow Him to flesh out what is inside.

We ought to see standards simply as a means of reflecting our heart's desire to please God, not as crutch we lean on to find favour with God. Our sanctification is not us adding righteousness to righteousness, it is God causing us to increasingly become what we are. He is externalising what happened internally the day we were saved. Legalism seeks to internalise righteousness through external acts.

Much of the Reformation was a fight against legalism. It was a fight against the belief that righteousness unto salvation could be achieved by human acts. It was a fight against the practical kind of legalism that thought spiritual progress was dependent on man, and upon adhering to church-made ideas.

The five *solas* or 'onlys' were the cry of the Reformation: Scripture alone. Grace alone. By faith alone. In Christ alone. For God's glory alone. Legalism opposes these five *solas* on every count.

1. **Legalism stands in opposition to Scripture.** Instead of going no further than Scripture, it very often adds or deletes things from Scripture to support its own rules. More importantly, it makes its rules the authority in the place of Scripture. People measure themselves not on the Bible, but on others.
2. **Legalism stands in opposition to faith.** It is an external, sight-oriented system. It focuses not on the things which cannot be seen, such as the death of Christ, and the internal righteousness worked out by the Spirit – but on what physical eyes can see and measure.

3. **Legalism stands in opposition to grace.** It does not realise the depth of God's righteousness – which is far higher and greater than a bunch of manmade rules. True Christianity falls slain before God, begging His enablement, for salvation and for sanctification. Legalism opposes grace with a reliance on human willpower.
4. **Legalism stands in opposition to Christ.** It does not continually look upon the cross of Christ, on the righteousness of Christ as our only basis of right standing with God. It looks to self to substitute its own righteousness.
5. **Legalism stands in opposition to God's glory.** Instead of God receiving the glory as the source of our righteousness, magnifying His grace, humans get the glory as the source, magnifying our willpower. May we see that Christian liberty is freedom to obey Christ, not self. May we see legalism in salvation and in sanctification as the error it is, and oppose it with Scripture.