

## Legalism

*...you teach as doctrines the precepts of men. Neglecting the commandment of God you hold to the tradition of men. (Mark 7:6-7)*

Everyone in the world wakes up every day at war- whether or not they know it. Christians are at war with sin because they are at peace with God. Non-Christians are at peace with sin and consequently at war with God. Aside from warfare with indwelling sin, believers face another challenge related to the battle for obeying God, and that is the conflict to do the will of God and *not* the will of man, and to live joyfully and freely by what God says, and nothing else. This battle is called legalism. Legalism is a deadly trap many fall into. It takes various forms, which lurk in the recesses of our hearts. Let's explore legalism with three simple questions.

### What is it?

Legalism, on the one side, is any attempt to either earn or retain one's salvation. If you think being *accepted* by God is up to you, or *staying* in God's favor once saved is up to you, that's legalism. But, on the other side, a different form of legalism lurks when your conscience is bound by anything *beyond* what God says: do this or don't do this, where God hasn't put such limitations.

You can smell the spirit of legalism in Christian organizations when the focus is on performance, rules, looking good, duty, discipline, in short, you—what you can do for God, you looking like a good Christian, our church towering as a great church, rather than what God has done for you in Christ.

Maybe you've run into many issues like this. Churches have rules for people ranging from dating to money, make-up, hair-length, dress, movies, music, and alcohol. A huge issue for many in our congregation is alcohol. It will serve as a case study for this chapter. I routinely see young college students shy away from wine at the Lord's Supper, their conscience being bound by rules at their university. In fact, the Dean of Students office at this university used to distribute a teaching on alcohol use, that roundly condemned it as sin.

When we examine the biblical evidence we find that far from being forbidden in scripture, God *celebrates* the use of wine-- a moderate, controlled use of wine as emblematic of God's sweet and intoxicating grace. Clearly drunkenness is sin and dehumanizing- that stands beyond doubt.

Legalism, then, either commands what God hasn't or forbids something the Bible does not forbid. Let me say right off that for some of you, drinking *is* wrong because you can't handle it. Maybe you are a recovering substance abuser, and to imbibe again would be death. You know your weakness. That's why our church provides grape juice at the Lord's Table as an alternative to wine.

## How does legalism work?

Legalism almost always starts with good intentions. When it comes to God's will, what would be good intentions? Naturally, keeping it, living in it, and avoiding any and all situations that compromise it. Let's be perfectly clear: desiring to be obedient to God is *not* legalism. Obedience is the fruit or the evidence of a new heart. To be like Christ in thought, word and deed is to be gloriously human, to be free, to be whole.

*...like the Holy One who called you, be holy in all your behavior, be holy for I am holy* (1 Peter 1:15-16)

*He himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds we are healed.*  
(1 Peter 2:24)

Jesus saved us not only from the penalty of sin but also from its power, from its polluting affect in our hearts; He set us free to lovingly serve and obey Him with joy! Jesus died to heal us from a life of self-indulgence and self-absorption.

Legalism, then, starts with a desire to avoid sin, a good thing, but quickly creates other sins. Apply this paradigm to our case study with wine:

T or F: Drunkenness is a sin. TRUE

T or F: Drunkenness occurs when you have too many drinks. TRUE

Therefore, what's the best way to avoid drunkenness? How you answer that question reveals legalism. Legalism answers: Don't drink at all.

Legalism adds to God's law. So now we have a new rule: play it safe. This is called "putting a fence around the law". That means you erect a barrier, a regulation, making the possibility of breaking the law virtually impossible. The Jewish conservatives of Jesus' day, the Pharisees, did this prolifically. They wrote the Talmud, an elaboration on God's law, putting up innumerable boundaries around God's prohibitions. Some boundaries *expand*, others *restrict*. For instance, if it was wrong to travel more than 100 yards on the Sabbath, they said, "Hey, let's play it safe, let's *restrict* in the name of holiness, and move that to 50 yards. That way you won't come close to sinning. But if it was wrong to go within 50 feet of a person with leprosy, let's *expand* that and make it 100 feet so no one can come close to violating it. See the fence around the law? The new regulation keeps you safe from the particular disobedience of *-fill-in-the-blank*.

All this sounds very pious. Why? Because it is in fact good to avoid temptation. Only the fool refuses to deal honestly with the power of temptation. Regarding alcohol, legalism reasons like this:

Drunkenness is a sin.

Drunkenness occurs when you drink too much.

Since it is *not necessary* to drink, avoid it.

Is it necessary? No. But it may be enjoyable. The danger here is we may prefer our regulations to God's. Jesus said of the Pharisees in Mark 7:6-7:

*you teach as doctrines the precepts of men. Neglecting the commandment of God you hold to the tradition of men.*

We may have higher ethics than Jesus. And often our rules are easier to keep. And when we do we may be saddled with pride of performance.

Legalism also reasons thus:

It's not the *best choice*, so use something else.

Is there a better choice? That might depend on the situation.

Or like this:

It can *become habit forming*, so don't start.

Can it be habit forming? Certainly, but so is TV, surfing the net, and many other good things. It may not be the wise thing to do, under certain circumstances, but that's another question.

Or like this:

It is *potentially destructive*, so leave it alone.

Has alcohol destroyed many people and homes? Without a doubt.

But so has sex, money, being overzealous for work, food, and lust for control, leisure or even beauty. If alcohol has slain its thousands, words and gossip have slain their ten thousands.

This logic looks noble on the face of it, but upon close inspection crumbles under the weight of reason. It reduces sin to a set of behaviors to be avoided, rather than a failure to love and obey God from the heart, out of gratitude, out of desperation. Some people can testify that growing up their father raged that "you better not make us late for church, you better wear pretty clothes to church," and then would come home and beat on his wife.

Or like this:

It is *potentially offensive* to some Christians.

Is it true that it is offensive? No doubt. But what about the thousand other things that are potentially offensive- she has a fur, she wears Ralph Lauren, he drives too nice a car, she is overweight, I don't like purple fabric, the preacher should always wear a robe, the service should start at 11:15, they go out to eat on Sunday. We could develop a long list of offensive things and have no freedom to do anything! Thankfully, that is not God's design!

Romans 14 deals at length with the issue of the *weaker* and the *stronger* brother. The *weaker* brother is the one who has standards above God's. His conscience is not yet liberated to the degree it must be. He thinks it is wrong to drink wine. He is tempted to look down on those who do. "What's wrong with you, flirting with sin?" The *stronger* brother has a liberated conscience and is truly free to enjoy wine. He is tempted to feel superior to the weaker brother. "Come on, get a life!"

They both have responsibility. The *weaker* brother must develop his conscience and stop calling sin what the bible does not. He must also never act in a way as to violate his conscience. The *stronger* brother bears with the scruples of the weaker. He never intentionally sets before him a stumbling block, meaning, he doesn't invite him over and flaunt his wine drinking.

Legalism works because it is so serious about self-denial and commitment and discipline, and thus appealing to our pride. It makes life manageable. Six steps to godliness and you

feel great about your performance. Yet Jesus slammed the religious right of his day because they were full of pride and were condescending toward those who didn't keep the rules so well.

*You strain gnats out of your wine vats and neglect the weightier matters of the law.*

You know legalism in yourself when:

-Your identity is in your accomplishments; you think in terms of what you can do for God, rather than what he mercifully has done for you. The goal is to look like Christ, rather than be transformed by Christ.

-You counsel others from a position of strength, you feel superior, your ethics are attainable.

-You are blind to your lack of humility and your pride: you assume you know just how God wants things; you lean on traditions rather than God's word; all the while you are a hypocrite, not consistently living what you preach.

### **Why is it wrong?**

Legalism is offensive to Jesus because God has said something is good- in this case wine- but man has said abstaining from it is better. Why do you need higher standards than Jesus, who we know drank wine? Only God can bind the conscience. It's always better to have your conscience informed by God's word.

*4 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, 2 through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, 3 who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. 4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. (1 Timothy 4:1-5)*

People would rather live by rules than rely on the power of the Holy Spirit. You don't need prayer, the Spirit and the word if you set up rules to live by.

We tend to pick and chose our favorite virtues: American fundamentalism carefully taught against movies and drinking and dancing, but taught ineptly about racism, caring for the poor, and engaging the culture.

Legalism develops rules which we can keep but really doesn't probe the depths of God's law. It renders life manageable by your strength. It appears to negate Jesus' admonition, *without Me you can do nothing.* (John 15:5)

Legalism gives non-Christians the wrong impression about our faith. Following Jesus isn't primarily behaviors, but rather it's a glorious savoir. To be a Christian is to be

gripped by grace, and then under the Spirit's control to live under Jesus' lordship, while enjoying wholeheartedly the good gifts God has given us. But we use them well only with complete dependence upon the Spirit.