

What Is Legalism?

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To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns.

Charlotte Brontë, Preface to the Second Edition of *Jane Eyre*

All one has to do is read posts on some Christian forums to know that the labels legalism, legalist, antinomianism, and antinomian are being shot back and forth like spitballs in an out-of-control classroom. But do those using these terms really know what they mean? From what I have read on these forums, it seems many do not.

My Background in Legalism

Before I go on, I want to explain that I should know something about legalism. I was, for many years, a legalist. I was a member of the Worldwide Church of God. I graduated from its Ambassador College and worked as a personal assistant to its founder, Herbert W. Armstrong (and, later, his successor, Joseph W. Tkach), answering his mail and writing for the church's *Plain Truth* magazine and other publications (among many other duties).

Almost all observers will agree that the Worldwide Church of God was a legalist church. Even the present leadership of the church admit to their historical legalism. About the only people who do not agree are those still caught up in the legalism found in the Worldwide Church of God's many splinter groups that remain faithful to Armstrong's teachings.

I am forever thankful that, over twenty-two years ago, God opened my mind and led me out of the bondage of legalism. I am also humbled that God has used my writings to help people whom He has prepared through the Holy Spirit to come out of that legalistic system and other such organizations and to experience God's free and sovereign saving grace. My prayer is that He will use this article similarly.

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Legalism Defined

What, then, is legalism? Although the words "legalist" and "legalism" are not found in the Bible, they are, nevertheless, defined by the Word of God.

Legalism is a serious error because, by strictly following it, sinners can miss salvation altogether. Even mere traces of legalism can limit our experience of the rich grace our Savior has procured for us, stunting our spiritual growth. Put briefly, Legalism is trying to earn our salvation, our justification, our sanctification, or any merit with God by law-keeping or other works. We know this to be the case, because, while not named as "legalism," turning to the law for justification, sanctification, or merit is plainly warned against in the Bible.

The Law Does Not Justify

Perhaps the clearest Scripture regarding the relationship of law-keeping to our justification is Galatians 2:16: "Yet knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the law, because no flesh will be justified by the works of the law."

To be justified is to be declared righteous. It is essential to our salvation that God declare us righteous. Otherwise, since He is the righteous judge who condemns all unrighteousness, He will condemn us. Paul, in the above verse, says, "a man is not justified by the works of the law... because no flesh will be justified by the works of the law." Very obviously, Paul is saying that law-keeping cannot justify us.

Paul explains this again in Romans 9:30-33:

What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, who didn't follow after righteousness, attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith; but Israel, following after a law of righteousness, didn't arrive at the law of righteousness. Why? Because they didn't seek it by faith, but as it were by works of the law. They stumbled over the stumbling stone; even as it is written, "Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and a rock of offense; and no one who believes in him will be disappointed."

In this passage, Paul is saying that Israel did not attain righteousness. They missed it because they tried to attain it by law-keeping, and, because they did not have faith, they found Jesus Christ a stumbling stone. The Gentiles, on the other hand, found righteousness by faith in Christ.

In Romans 3, we read,

As it is written, "There is no one righteous; no, not one...." Now we know that whatever things the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may be brought under the judgment of God. Because by the works of the law, no flesh will be justified in his sight. For through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the law, a righteousness of God has been revealed, being testified by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all those who believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God set forth to be an atoning sacrifice, through faith in his blood, for a demonstration of his righteousness through the passing over of prior sins, in God's forbearance; to demonstrate his righteousness at this present time; that he might himself be just, and the justifier of him who has faith in Jesus. Where then is the boasting? It is excluded. By what manner of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. We maintain therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Romans 3:10, 19-28

The law gives us the knowledge of sin, but never justifies us. Instead, we who believe are justified freely by grace through the redemption that is in Christ. God maintains His righteousness. He did not set aside His righteous demands. Jesus met those demands for us. Thus, boasting is excluded because we are not justified by our works, but by faith.

But what about Romans 2:13: "For it isn't the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law will be justified." Isn't Paul here stating that, in order to be justified, we must be doers of the law? No, he is not, and for at least two good reasons.

Suppose I say, Those who leap across the Atlantic Ocean will get to the other side. By saying this, I am not saying that everyone who wants to get to the other side of the Atlantic must leap across. They can, for example, take a ship or fly in an airliner. Similarly, Paul is not saying that everyone who wants to be justified must keep the law. They can be justified by grace.

Also, by saying, Those who leap across the Atlantic will get to the other side, I am not saying that it is possible to leap across the Atlantic. I am only saying that, if it were possible, this procedure would get you across. But it is not possible. Similarly, as we have already seen, Paul, in Romans 3, tells us, "by the works of the law, no flesh will be justified in his sight." Does this contradict Romans 2:13? No! If we were able to keep the law perfectly, we would be justified. But that is no more possible than leaping across the Atlantic. It is simply not possible for us to keep the law to God's perfect standards. In Romans 2:13, Paul is telling the legalists to not think they are justified by the law simply because they hear the law. He is telling them that if they want to be justified by the law, they must be keeping the law perfectly. In other words, he is telling them that they are not justified by the law.

The Law Does Not Sanctify

As we are not justified by the law, we also are not sanctified by the law. This is important to point out because many Reformed believers say that, although we are not justified by the law but through faith, we are sanctified by law-keeping. Notice this from Greg Bahnsen: "Sanctification in God's law makes us children of God and brethren of Christ... The knowledge of God and salvation depend on keeping His commandments" (*Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 176, 179). Rousas Rushdoony wrote, "Sanctification depends on our law-keeping in mind, word, and deed. The perfection of the incarnate Word was manifested in His law-keeping; can the people of His kingdom pursue their calling to be perfect in any way other than by His law-word?" (*Institutes of Biblical Law*, 307). And he also claims, "Salvation is by the grace of God through faith; sanctification is by the law of God.... Those who are in the covenant are in a covenant of grace which is also a covenant of works. The grace enables them to perform the works which are required of them" (*ibid.*, 714).

Galatians 3:1-3 exposes the above teachings as legalist lies: "Foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you not to obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly set forth among you as crucified? I just

want to learn this from you. Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now completed in the flesh?" We do not start out being justified through faith in the atoning work of Jesus only to have to keep the works of the law to be sanctified. Hebrews 10:10 states that "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." We do not achieve our sanctification by keeping the law but Christ has achieved it for us by His atonement.

So far, we have seen a clear dichotomy between the law and faith. The law shows us our sins, but cannot save. Salvation is by grace through faith in the work Jesus Christ has already completed to save us. As Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast."

But Aren't Works Necessary and the Law Holy, Just, and Good?

But, you may say, what about Ephesians 2:10? Doesn't this say that works are necessary? Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before that we would walk in them." I am not denying that we are created to perform good works. But those good works never obligate God to do anything for us (including save us), and they are the result of the salvation God has already worked in us without the law by grace through faith.

Philippians 2:12 is another often misunderstood Scripture. It says, "So then, my beloved, even as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." At first, this might sound like we must work for our salvation. But notice the verse that follows: "For it is God who works in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). In other words, God is working His salvation in us. We show this outwardly in the way we live.

The legalist will sometimes point to Romans 7:12: "Therefore the law indeed is holy, and the commandment holy, and righteous, and good." Certainly, the law is holy. But to understand this verse as it applies to Christians, we must see it in its context. Is Paul saying here that we must keep the law to earn favor with God?

In verses 1-4 of Romans 7, we read,

Or don't you know, brothers (for I speak to men who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man for as long as he lives? For the woman that has a husband is bound by law to the husband while he lives, but if the husband dies, she is discharged from the law of the husband. So then if, while the husband lives, she is joined to another man, she would be called an adulteress. But if the husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is no adulteress, though she is joined to another man. Therefore, my brothers, you also were made dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you would be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead, that we might bring forth fruit to God.

Romans 7:1-4

Paul is drawing an analogy between a wife who is under the law of her husband only as long as he lives and a Christian's relationship to the law. He says that we have been freed from the law by the body of Christ. What I believe is implied here is that Christ died under the law to pay our debt to the law, thus freeing us from the law and allowing us to marry the risen Jesus Christ. This doesn't sound like Paul is saying we are bound to keep the law!

Paul goes on in verses 5-6: "For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were through the law, worked in our members to bring forth fruit to death. But now we have been discharged from the law, having died to that in which we were held; so that we serve in newness of the spirit, and not in oldness of the letter." Paul speaks of our preconversion lives as being in the flesh because at that time we walked only according to our carnal desires. The law worked death in us because we unavoidably broke it. In fact, the law aroused our passions to break it. But now, as regenerated, saved Christians, we are delivered from the law because it is dead to us. Now we are free to serve God truly, spiritually, and not just trying to keep the letter of the law.

If we would try to return to law-keeping, the law would again rouse our old man with his passions. We must leave both the law and our old man in their graves.

Romans 7:7-12:

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? May it never be! However, I wouldn't have known sin, except through the law. For I wouldn't have known coveting, unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." But sin, finding occasion through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of coveting. For apart from the law, sin is dead. I was alive apart from the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. The commandment, which was for life, this I found to be for death; for sin, finding occasion through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. Therefore the law indeed is holy, and the commandment holy, and righteous, and good.

And so we see that Paul's statement that the law is holy is in contrast to his rhetorical question, "Is the law sin?" Well, of course, the law is not sin. But it leads to sin and death because of our depraved natures (which Paul later refers to as the law of sin). Therefore, if there was to be any hope for us, we had to be freed from the law (as explained in the earlier verses). As Paul bemoans toward the end of this chapter, "What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me out of the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ, our Lord! So then with the mind, I myself serve God's law, but with the flesh, the sin's law" (Romans 7:24-25).

By the way, all of the above clearly refutes the position held by some that Paul was only saying we are no longer under the ceremonial parts of the law. Those who hold this position might say we are still under moral laws and the Ten Commandments, but laws such as the temple rituals, dietary laws, and rules defining "uncleanness" are at an end (in fact, the distinction between "moral law" and "ceremonial law" is artificial and not found in the Bible). But it is certainly not such rituals that cause us to sin, and Paul specifically names the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet," as part of the law he is referring to. Thus, the "ceremonial law" only argument does not stand up to scrutiny.

In summary, legalism is the belief that we attain justification or sanctification or righteousness or any other merit by obeying the law or, indeed, any other rules. It is entirely contrary to the Gospel and must be refuted and condemned wherever found.

"For Christ is the end of Law for righteousness to everyone that believes" (Romans 10:4, *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*).

In a future article, I will discuss antinomianism.