

Legalism

Introduction:

What is legalism? Why is it so dangerous?

What are some—modern-day examples of legalism among Christians and churches?

How can a believer discern between rules that are truly biblical and those that are merely cultural or human-made?

Defining Legalism:

The belief that salvation demands or depends upon total obedience to the letter of the law. Examples of legalism include an excessive concern for minute details of the law coupled with a neglect of its fundamental concerns, and a preoccupation with human legal traditions. [*Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes*, Manser, M. H. (1999)].

A Key Passage Regarding Legalism: Acts 15

The flood of Gentile believers into the church surfaced underlying attitudes of pride and prejudice. Some legalistic Jews even tried to demand that the new converts be circumcised. Fierce arguing among the parties resulted in the first church council. At Jerusalem the apostles and elders convened to consider the relationship between Jewish believers and Gentile Christians, between the Mosaic law and the gospel of grace.

The council concluded, based on the Old Testament book of Amos (as expounded by James, leader of the proceedings) and in light of the sovereign experiences of both Peter and Paul, that Gentiles were equal partners with the Jews in God's eternal plan. Further, the council ruled that salvation depended solely on belief in Jesus, not on keeping the law of Moses.

The Jerusalem Council summarized its decision regarding Gentile circumcision in a letter. This letter was carried to Antioch of Syria by Judas and Silas. Paul and Barnabas accompanied these specially chosen messengers.

The letter instructed the Gentile converts to strictly avoid idolatry, immorality, and eating the meat of unbled animals—activities common among the Gentiles that were especially offensive to Jewish sensibilities.

This decision and directive brought joy to the believers at Antioch. The Jerusalem entourage stayed with the Gentile church there for a while, strengthening the believers and teaching God's Word.

Legalism and the Gospel: Legalism is contrary to the gospel

Gal 2:16

Mt 23:13,15

Ro 3:20-24

Php 3:8-9

“To add anything to Christ as being necessary to salvation, say circumcision or any human work of any kind, is to deny that Christ is the complete Savior, is to put something human on a par with him, yea to make it the crowning point. That is fatal. A bridge to heaven that is built of 99/100 of Christ and even only 1/100 of anything human breaks down at the joint and ceases to be a bridge.”

(R.C.H. Lenski)

Legalism and the Law: Legalism represents a fatal misunderstanding of the purpose of OT law

Ro 9:31-32

Ro 3:20

Gal 3:10-11

The ugly effects of legalism

1. Lack of love

Mt 23:23

2. Legalism actually contradicts the spirit of OT law.

Hos 6:6

Mic 6:7-8

Mt 23:14

Lk 10:31-32

Jn 7:49

3. Spiritual pride

Lk 18:11-12

Mt 6:1-2,5,16

Mt 23:5-7

Lk 16:15

Ro 10:3

4. **Formalism**

Isa 29:13

Mk 7:6

5. **Degeneration into man-made rules**

Isa 29:13

Mk 7:7-8

6. **Hypocrisy**

Mt 23:27-28

1Sa 15:19-22

Mt 15:3-9

Mk 7:9-13

Mt 23:25-26

Jn 7:19

7. **Spiritual blindness**

Jn 9:16

Scriptural warnings against legalism

Mt 16:6

Mk 8:15

Mt 16:12

Gal 4:10-11; 5:2-4

The burden of legalism

Ac 15:10

Ps 130:3

Jas 2:10

The example of legalism: Paul

Php 3:4-6

Gal 1:14

How does legalism differ from voluntary self-restriction due to the law of love?

Romans 14:14–21

Is it legalistic to maintain spiritual disciplines?

“Sometimes we make ‘spiritual disciplines’ a way of making our way up the mountain to experience God. However, unless we are going regularly to the Scriptures to find Christ and crying out to Him for salvation in prayer, even personal Bible reading and prayer can become methods of idolatry and self-trust.”

~ Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life* (ch. 5 “Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There!”)

The answer to legalism: the grace of Jesus Christ

Ac 15:11

Mt 5:17

Gal 3:13

4:21-31

Eph 2:8-9

Conclusion:

What are some of the common, modern-day misconceptions about salvation? In what human elements do many people trust to save them?

“Throughout its history, the church’s leaders have met to settle doctrinal issues. Historians point to seven ecumenical councils in the church’s early history, especially the Councils of Nicea (A.D. 325) and Chalcedon (A.D. 451). Yet the most important council was the first one—the Jerusalem Council—because it established the answer to the most vital doctrinal question of all: ‘What must a person do to be saved?’ The apostles and elders defied efforts to impose legalism and ritualism as necessary pre-requisites for salvation. They forever affirmed that salvation is totally by grace through faith in Christ alone.”

—John MacArthur

(*Acts: The Spread of the Gospel*. MacArthur Bible Studies (79–80). Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2000).