

DOCTRINE OF LEGALISM

I. Definition and Introduction:

- A. Legalism is defined as a strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code i.e., observance of the letter rather than the spirit of the law, red tape. Merriam-Webster; Webster's Universal Dictionary
- B. A legalist is someone who follows the law very closely, especially by paying more attention to rules and details than to the intentions behind them. Cambridge Dictionary
- C. Legalism as applied to God's word points to appended or added decrees and/or teachings that are derived from a state of unsound reasoning and otherwise omitted or not intended in the WOG.
- D. The legalist elevates these excessive stipulations to having the same authority as the WOG.
- E. Legalism was instrumental in the downfall of man in the Garden. Gen.3:3 (Eve's addition to "not touch" the fruit).
- F. The Bible makes it clear that God's word as recorded in the canon of Scripture is God-breathed (2Tim.3:16), hence perfect and therefore all sufficient as it stands unaltered, in providing man with insight and knowledge as to the POG. Psal.19:7; Jam.1:25
- G. God warned the Jews in the giving of the Law not to stray to the right or to the left of His words. Deu.5:32; 17:11,20; 28:14; Josh.1:7; 23:6
- H. To turn aside to the right or left is equivalent to adding to the WOG or taking away from it. Deu.4:2
- I. God's word is sovereign and to add to or take away from it is tantamount to usurping His authority and destroys the integrity and intent of BD as it has been contextually written and doctrinally intended.
- J. God's warning to the Jews points to the two fallacious approaches of legalism and liberalism in the teaching, understanding and application of BD.
- K. To enter into either fallacious realm destroys the balance of perfection that God has so passed on to mankind through His Word.
- L. It is the responsibility of all communicators to seek the entire council of BD (Act.20:27), under God's designed system for communication, and avoid any tendencies to avoid teaching something that is not Biblically substantiated or omitting any increments of truth.
- M. The only security for a pastor-teacher (P-T) to fulfill His obligation in this regard is to teach verse by verse, utilizing the ICE (isagogical, categorical and exegetical) hermeneutics maintaining the integrity of context immediate and remote and avoid consistent digressions from the context for whatever reasons.
- N. In so doing, the communicator ensures that God's word, as it is so intended via context of the particular book being taught, maintains its integrity of balance for the exhortation and edification of those allotted to his charge.

- O.** This approach helps protect the P-T from overreacting to pressures found common in the ministry and engaging in the energy of the flesh to correct problems perceived or real.
 - P.** It allows the power of BD coupled with the +V of the sheep to have its desired affect without infringing upon the freedom of volition and the saints to work out their own salvation. Phi.2:12
 - Q.** It allows God and the POG under grace to retain rightful authority over men in support of the authority given to the P-T to oversee his flock.
 - R.** To approach the Bible either from a legalistic or liberal standpoint is to destroy the true concept of Christianity and in effect produces a man-made religious approach to God a.k.a. religiosity.
 - S.** Biblical Christianity seeks to develop a relationship with God based on His terms and conditions, while religiosity incorporates man's own terms and conditions to whatever degree.
- II.** Legalism and Ph₁ faith (SAJG; see doctrine of...).
- A.** Saving faith from eternal condemnation is an act of faith apart from works. Rom.8:1; Eph.2:8-9; Tit.3:5
 - B.** The object of faith is the Person of Jesus Christ. Joh.3:16; Act.16:29-30
 - C.** The most damning legalism proposes a works system for salvation apart from faith i.e., keeping the Law, being circumcised, being good, etc.
 - D.** The Jews are an historical example of legalism at its worst in this vein as will be addressed later in the doctrine.
 - A.** Early in Church history, a faction of the Pharisaic sect of Judaism began teaching saving faith as faith + works (a.k.a. Judaizers). Act.15:1-12 cp. vs.5
 - B.** The epistle to the Galatians evolves around the infiltration of these types of legalists in the Galatian church. Gal.1:6 cp.3:2-6
 - E.** This approach is a fruitless system to salvation as one must keep the whole Law, which is impossible. Gal.3:3-6 cf.Act.15:10
 - F.** Legalism Ph₁ enslaves the believer robbing him of his freedoms in Christ otherwise obtained through saving faith. Gal.5:1
 - G.** This approach introduces a life spent just trying to get into heaven having no real extended spiritual advance in the POG. Gal.5:4
- III.** Legalism and Ph₂ (the Christian experience: R_BAJG and MAJG).
- A.** Unabated legalism Ph₁ automatically places the believer in state of spiritual reversionism (*see doctrine of...*)
 - B.** Its leaven otherwise can destroy an adjusted believer's Ph₂ operating on a sound gospel Ph₁.
 - C.** This danger is addressed by Paul in his epistle to the Colossians most specifically chapter 2.
 - D.** The maximum loss for those that implement legalism in their Christian life is the ultimate reward of inheritance called "the prize" (Col.2:18-19). *See the Doctrine of SG₃*

- E.** Paul places legalism in the category of false-teaching a.k.a. traditions of men and elementary principles of the world (Col.2:8).
 - F.** The examples he uses harks to the potential negative impact of the Judaizers upon otherwise adjusted local churches such as Colossae.
 - G.** He examples legalism as it effects worship (Col.2:16-17) and spirituality (Col.2:20-22).
 - 1.** Its effect in worship produces teaching that fails to interpret the spirit of the Law as designed for feasts, holidays, etc.
 - 2.** This as a result of rejecting the doctrines of Christology and dispensations.
 - 3.** He then examples their legalism for obtaining a state of spirituality by not engaging in material things in life that might appeal to the flesh and in fact should be taboo.
 - 4.** The legalist promotes authority of the material over the authority of the Person of Christ as providing spirituality.
 - H.** Paul makes clear that neither religiosity nor an ascetic approach to the body is beneficial towards curbing the STA honoring God (Co.2:23).
 - I.** True worship in spirituality is the combination of the FHS (via R_B) and the intake and application of sound Bible doctrine. Joh.4:23
- IV.** The Jews as examples of legalism and religiosity.
- A.** The Jews provide a Biblical observation as to those that historically have strayed both to the right and left of BD.
 - B.** Israel corporately has undergone two dispersions from the land.
 - C.** The first dispersion of a two-fold part (721 and 586 BC) was due to their failure to maintain their moral integrity of the Law.
 - D.** A simple perusal and observations found in the OT reveals that God kicked them out of the land due predominately to forms of immorality (idolatry) to include phallic reversionism, murder, etc. Jeremiah; note the call for reversion recovery Jer.25:5-6
 - E.** The Jews became liberal in their approach to the Law and dismissed the necessity of commandments that called for refraining from corporate STA immorality and separation from cults that promoted such.
 - F.** The consequence was a dispersion of Israel from the land for 70 years.
 - G.** By the time of the Gospel era and incarnation, Israel had developed a whole different approach to God's Word.
 - H.** Under the mainline system of Judaism, they had taken the Law and added to it a "hedge" of additional manmade laws as a reaction to their previous moral failings.
 - I.** This legalistic approach resulted in a system of religion that produced an extreme example of legalism and its consequences.
 - J.** By the time of the arrival of their Messiah, Israel under its current legalistic system of belief, promoted a system of works by man (circumcision, keeping the Law, being a Jew, etc) as the means of having a relationship with God and getting to heaven.

- K.** The end result was that they did not look to Christ through faith as their means of salvation, but rather to themselves.
 - L.** Because Christ did not fit their “mold” of legalistic religiosity, which obviously distorted what they were looking for in a Messiah, they murdered Jesus.
 - M.** In Jesus warning to His disciples of the hostility and hatred of –V that they would face in their own ministries, He points to the Jews that adhered to mainline Judaism as a prime example of types from whom persecution can be expected. Joh.15:18-25; note that “*they*” in vss.20-25 = “the Jews”.
 - N.** Due to an adherence to this type of religious reversionism they became a people totally antagonistic to the spiritual truths of the Word, and God once again kicked Israel out of the land in the dispersion of 70AD.
 - O.** The irony that can’t be missed, contrary to how most Christians regard the consequences of sin, that it was under this system of legalism that produced the gravest condemnation upon Israel as they were kicked out of the land for some 1878 years (until 1948 AD).
 - P.** While straying to the left, Israel brought condemnation upon herself for immorality, but when they strayed to the right, they became a religious idol to themselves bringing an unprecedented wrath from God as a nation.
- V.** Observations of legalism during the ministry of Christ.
- A.** The Gospels make clear that the Pharisaic sect of Judaism was the dominate influence and enforcers of this legalistic religion.
 - B.** They are seen as the main contributors to the persecution and harassment of Jesus during His ministry.
 - C.** They were consistently at odds with Jesus in His conduct and teaching.
 - D.** Jesus made it clear to His disciples to beware of this insidious tact to BD. Mat.16:6-12
 - E.** The principle is that a little leaven ruins the whole lump of dough. Gal.5:9
 - F.** While the Sadducees were “in bed” with the Pharisees in the plot to kill Jesus, they were more of the “liberal” bent as they rejected portions of BD, such as resurrection. Mat.22:23
 - G.** However, both sects were enmeshed in the system of legalism.
 - H.** Under this system of religiosity, the Jews developed a compatible partner to legalism called “the traditions of men”. Mar.7:1-13
 - I.** As the passage in Mark makes clear, when legalism is introduced into one’s approach to God, the man made laws are elevated to the same level as BD. Mar.7:7
 - J.** Legalism produces a form of self-righteousness, vanity before God. Mar.7:6-7 cp. Mat.5:20
 - K.** When one seeks to enforce these man made traditions, the consequence always results in disobedience to true principles of BD. Mar.7:9
 - L.** It in effect destroys the very intent of the principle of BD that their legalism is directly attached to.

- M.** The irony of legalism is that it forces the individual to stray to the left regarding other doctrine such as justice (impartiality/fairness), mercy (compassion/grace) and faithfulness (integrity of intent). Mat.23:23
- N.** The Pharisees reflect certain characteristics that can be seen with those that have legalistic trends and operate accordingly:
1. They think better of themselves reflecting a condescending and arrogant attitude towards others. Joh.7:45-49
 2. This is a form of building one's righteousness upon the perceived unrighteousness of others.
 3. In turn, they take issue with any type of association with others that do not meet their arrogant standards of self-righteousness. Mat.9:11-13
 4. This points to a legalistic approach to the Doctrine of Separation and in essence kills the intended impact of the witness of the life towards potential +V.
 5. They try to weave nets of suspicion upon others that engage in the liberties of the Law, without Biblical substantiation. Ex. Jesus' observance of the Sabbath. Mat.12:1-8; Joh.5-18
 6. In other words, they call things "sin" when it is not or they insinuate sin upon others that they have no collaborating evidence Biblically or factually.
 7. They step outside their limits of authority in intrusion upon other's rights. Ex. The excommunication of the man born blind from the synagogue without any Biblical mandate to do so. Joh.9:34
 8. Legalism is often a result of power lust.
 9. In thinking more highly of themselves, they self-exalt themselves over the common layman. Mat.23:2,6-7
 10. In reality they are hypocritical in that their approach to the POG stymies spiritual advancement. Mat.23:13
 11. They feed on others with legalistic trends and weak in grace seeking to conform them into their own mold of legalism. Mat.23:15
 12. They are idiots blind as to their own failings. Mat.23:16-23 cp. Mat.15:14
 13. They are hypercritical of others that do not conform to their legalistic standards of righteousness. Mat.23:24
 14. On the other hand, they overlook failures of those that have their own STA weaknesses. *This can be a hazard for all believers.*
 15. They tend to meddle in other's private affairs, which is STA activity. 1Pet.4:15
 16. They scrutinize the conduct of others waiting for a chance to make accusation implicitly or explicitly as to one's liberties in God's plan. Luk.6:7
 17. They instill fear of the man rather than a true fear of God. Joh.9:22
 18. They use heavy-handed tactics and seek to "bully" people into line.

- 19. They place unreasonable expectations upon others for obedience when they themselves won't deal with their own sin in the life. Mat.23:4
- O. It was the religious leaders under the system of legalism that both Jesus and John the Baptism showed the least tolerance towards during their ministries. Mat.3:7; Mat.23:33

VI. Legalism and grace.

- C. Legalism is totally incompatible with grace and is anti-grace orientation.
- D. Grace is the underwriter of God's plan. Col.1:3-6
- E. Salvation Ph₁ is a grace provision provided by God. Tit.2:11; 1Pet.1:10
- F. Grace denotes that salvation is a non-meritorious proposition and is not dependent upon man, but God. Rom.5:15-16; 6:23
- G. There is a place for works in the Christian life, that being the application of BD in their Ph₂. Cf. the book of James
- H. However, even one's Ph₂ remains a grace proposition. 2Pet.3:18
- I. 2Pet.3:18 is a mandate for the tandem application of both grace and knowledge of BD in the believer's spiritual growth.
- J. It is grace that is the antidote for the infiltration of legalism and knowledge that is the antidote for any omission of BD.
- K. It is by grace that one can have experiential fellowship with God (1Joh.1:9); it is by grace that God communicates BD to us (Eph.4:7,11-13); it is by grace that we have all of the other Divine operating assets to apply BD (Eph.3:7).
- L. With the knowledge of BD we learn the POG and what constitutes sin versus the freedoms we are to be allowed under the POG.
- M. While grace does not condone sin, it accepts sin as a reality in the Christian's life (cf.Ecc.7:20) and has made all the provision necessary for one to overcome their sin in the life to make the MAJG.
- N. Legalism supplants the grace of God in the Christian life with its own brand of self-righteousness and seeks to destroy the very liberties of God's plan bestowed upon believers. Gal.2:4
- O. Legalism attacks the power of R_B, the freedom of volition, dares to read the intent of one's heart and seeks to impose another's righteousness in the place of true righteousness that comes from application of BD in FHS based upon one's freedom of choice.

VII. Concluding observations.

- A. Legalism usurps the Sovereign authority of BD.
- B. It transplants the authority of God with the authority of men.
- C. The truth of BD provides true freedom in the Christian life (Joh.8:31-32), while legalism robs believers of their freedoms.
- D. Legalism is rampant in the church today.
- E. Denominationalism steeped in the traditions of men is the primary evidence of this fact.

- F.** Due to the consequence of legalism and its resultant affect of a liberal approach to the spiritual realities of BD, the Church is in a “lukewarm” state primed to be vomited from the mouth of God. Rev.3:16
- G.** Legalism can attach itself to any doctrine or principle of doctrine and it is incumbent upon the P-T to ensure this leaven does not creep into the body of Christ.
- H.** Legalism sets the stage for unjust evaluations and criticisms of others based on appearance and violates Christ’s mandate on how we are to judge. Joh.7:24
- I.** We must all strive to maintain the proper balance of grace and knowledge.
- J.** While there are those that will have legalistic trends, those that have the balance of grace are to apply grace, even towards those legalistic.
- K.** However, in the ministry and as a pastoral authority, we must fight abuses on both sides of the coin on behalf of our own sheep.
- L.** And as the Jews and history has taught us, the leaven of legalism has the potential of producing maximum damage spiritually and experientially.
- M.** It oppresses the very freedom for those adjusted to BD that God has so designed to impart.
- N.** True freedom is not lasciviousness or legalism, but is the exact application of grace and BD designed to overcome the destruction that our flesh consistently seeks to accomplish.
- O.** Grace and knowledge are the direct products of God (Col.1:19), while legalism is the product of men.
- P.** An adjusted P-T seeks to protect the believer’s freedoms in Christ, even at personal cost of derision by legalists.
- Q.** Anti-legalism is not anti-grace anymore than anti-immorality is legalism.
- R.** Grace is the prescription for immorality (1Joh.1:9), while legalism is the venom for grace.
- S.** Legalism is Satan’s counterfeit for righteousness.
- T.** The more legalism is introduced in our thinking and applications, the more we become blind to the real issues needing addressed in our Christian lives.
- U.** *The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.* Rom.14:22
- V.** Beware of the legalist that will condemn what you approve with a clear and good conscience.

“You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”
Mat.23:24