

What Does Legalism Mean?

Currently, "legalism" is a popular subject. But just exactly what is meant by "legalism"? We often are made to wonder if all those who firmly preach anti-legalism are agreed as to the meaning of legalism?

Let us consider three possible meanings of the term in question. By so doing, we can determine the scripturalness or unscripturalness of each legalism:

(1) Does legalism mean strict adherence to God's law? If this is the meaning of the term, it represents a scriptural principle. Jesus told His disciples: "What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven . . ." (Matt. 16:19 and 18:18). To this end the "Spirit of truth" came to guide them unto all the truth (John 16:13). In this sense Jesus and His ambassadors were legalists. But where does this place the anti-legalists? It puts them in direct opposition to the authority of Christ. Furthermore, this meaning of legalism renders the anti-legalist a double-minded man. He refuses to accept the idea that anything is bound in religion - with one major exception, anti-legalism! He reminds us of the skeptic who says that the only possible truth is the truth that there can be no possible truth! (?) So if the doctrine of legalism is defined as "strict adherence to God's law," it is scripturally sound. Let modern thinkers (?) say what they will, it is still God's will that, "This is the end of the matter: all hath been heard: fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl. 12:13).

(2) If legalism is the disposition to make laws where God has made none, it is unscriptural. Consistent with the statement of Jesus cited above (Matt. 16:19 and 18:18), it is unscriptural to bind law when such has not been bound in heaven (and thus recorded in the New Testament). In this case, all who believe in and submit to the supreme authority of God's word are anti-legalists! That is to say, we are opposed to making and binding laws not bound in heaven. This type of legalism is a form of unbelief in that it assumes that God's laws do not go far enough.

(3) If legalism is depending on works of merit in order to be saved, legalism is unscriptural. This meaning of legalism is closely connected to the second, but not entirely the same. One might depend on added law for salvation (as with circumcision in Acts 15 and the Galatian letter), or one might regard the New Testament as a book of rules which one must keep perfectly in order to earn salvation. In both cases this type of legalism is firmly denied in the New Testament. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8, 9). See also Acts 15; Gal. 2:16 and 3:21; and Rom. 8:3.

At this point many become confused. Realizing that we are saved by "the free gift of God" (Rom. 6:23), it is assumed that any conditions would nullify grace. Thus the assumed principle: any free gift is received apart from any effort. This is both unreasonable and unscriptural. Think about it the next time you submit an application or agree to a 'trial offer' in order to receive a 'free' gift. You have not earned that gift but have merely availed yourself of a favor. So it is when we obey the gospel.

Again, those who believe what God's word sets forth on the matter of grace, are anti-legalist in this third sense. We object to the idea that man can earn his salvation. Such a doctrine makes void the cross of our Lord. However, at the same time we must affirm that God's grace is received by man's obedience. Thus Peter wrote: "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth . . ." (1 Pet. 1:22).

The subject of 'legalism' needs our careful investigation. We need to be as precise as possible when we employ terms that might have varied meanings. As in all things, tell us exactly what you mean, then we can search the Scriptures to see if these things are so. Will the real anti-legalists please stand up-and tell us what you mean?

- by Warren E. Berkley

'For The Show'

Theatrical performances require lots of preparation in order to be successful. Efforts to 'set the stage' are needed to make a play, skit, or musical production effective. Much work is done 'for the show.'

Unfortunately, many religious folks also like to make a show -- of their good works. There is

a determined effort on their part to make sure others will be aware of what they have done, are doing, or are planning to do. But here is where Jesus urged us to actually avoid things that would draw attention to our actions. In the Sermon the Mount, He repeatedly warned about doing our deeds to 'be seen of men' (Matthew 6:1ff). We must carefully heed His warning.

The next time you have an opportunity to serve, help, or encourage someone else, do it without any concern that others will know and commend you for what you have done. Know that God is always aware and will bless you for your work. Proverbs 15:3 says that *"the eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good."* We often use this verse to warn that no sin is hidden from God. But notice that no good deed goes unnoticed by Him either. So, don't worry that He won't see and know what you have done in His service.

Of course, frequently our good deeds will be noticed by others. This is not because we sought such attention, but simply because others learn of these things in a natural, unannounced manner. When this is the case, our desire should be to direct all the glory and honor to the Father. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also said: *"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven"* (Matthew 5:16).

Let us do nothing 'for the show' with a desire to direct attention to ourselves. Let us to everything to point others to Him. Think!

- by Greg Gwin