

The Heart of the Matter: Avoiding Legalism

Dr. C. J. Williams

Professor of Old Testament Studies

Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Concluding this issue's discussion of the three uses of the law, we will now turn to the fourth use—the *misuse* of the law, otherwise known as legalism. We begin by turning to Jesus' condemnation of the premier legalists of His day: the Pharisees. Matthew 23:1-36 provides an important look at legalism, what it is, how we can define it, and how we can avoid it.

Nowhere else in the New Testament does our Savior speak with such fire and passion as he does when condemning the legalism of the Pharisees. This is the same Savior who described himself as being gentle and lowly in heart, the same Savior who would not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax, the same Christ who dealt gently with those of weak faith, and tenderly called little children into the kingdom of heaven. But now his words are aflame with righteous anger. He calls the Pharisees hypocrites, sons of hell, blind fools, and a brood of vipers. The English translation of these verses contains eleven exclamation points. By the tone of his voice and the measure of his words, we can rightly conclude that there are few things more odious to our Savior than the legalistic misuse of His own holy law.

The Bible never uses the word “legalism,” nor does it give us a tidy definition. However, we see clear examples of it, such as the Pharisees, whom Jesus condemns here, and the Judaizers, whom Paul rebukes in the book of Galatians. Legalism may be one of those things that is hard to define, but you know it when you see it. The Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul certainly knew it when they saw it, but, for those of us with less discernment, it is useful to look at such examples of legalism and build a Biblical, working definition. So, let me propose this definition of legalism:

Legalism is a contortion of the true gospel, whereby a person tries to earn or maintain his salvation, or appear righteous in the eyes of men, by keeping, and often adding to, the law of God.

This may not be a perfect definition, but we will see its main elements born out from Scripture. However, our purpose is not just to define legalism, and talk about it abstractly. Through defining it, our purpose is to examine ourselves for it, and flee from it, and to reaffirm in our lives that our salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. That alone is the true gospel.

Our definition begins by saying that “Legalism is a *contortion* of the true gospel.” The true gospel is that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ is the singular, decisive principle. Any contortion of the gospel will either add to, or diminish, the central, singular principle of faith in Jesus Christ. Legalism does this very thing. It begins either with

the premise that our obedience is good enough to gain favor with God, or that faith needs to be supplemented by our own good works in order for us to be saved. In either case, it does not begin with faith alone.

In Jesus' long condemnation of the Pharisees and their legalism, Matthew 23:23 stands out as the heart of the matter. Here, Jesus identifies the central principles of the law, the same law that the Pharisees thought they were keeping. Had they read the law rightly, they would have understood that *faith* is the weightiest priority. Now when Jesus identifies justice, mercy and faith as the weighty matters of the law, he is not saying that *works* of justice and mercy, along with faith, are what saves a person. Justice and mercy are the companions of faith, but by faith we are saved. In a similar way, Paul grouped together hope and love along with faith in 1 Corinthians 13, even saying that love is the greatest of these. But when the apostle wrote Ephesians 2, he did not say "By grace you have been saved through love." He said "through faith." His point in 1 Corinthians 13 is that hope, and particularly love, are found along with true faith. In the same way, Jesus is saying that justice and mercy are the companions of faith, but faith is still the singular, decisive principle of our salvation. This is what the Pharisees lacked – faith alone in Christ alone as the true and only grounds of their hope of salvation. This lack of faith was at the heart of their legalism. They thought their obedience was sufficient, or that faith could never stand alone without their good works added to it. John Piper wrote that "the essence of legalism is when faith is not the engine of obedience." That is a fair summary of the legalism that Jesus condemns here in Matthew 23. It does not begin with faith alone.

Now in one sense, the Pharisees are something of a grotesque caricature of what legalism can become. Most legalists are not so obvious, and most legalism is much more subtle. I say most, because it does still exist in blatant form today. Years ago I was doing door to door evangelism with a fellow seminary student, and we happened to knock on the door of a Mormon Bishop. His wife, a very pleasant woman, invited us in, and in the ensuing conversation we asked her how she thought a person could be saved. She got a thoughtful, distant look on her face and finally said, "I guess by keeping the 10 Commandments." That is blatant legalism. Other blatant forms of legalism include modern Judaism, which traces its roots to the Pharisees, and Roman Catholicism, which still contends that our justification before God depends on faith and good works together. There are more examples of the blatant variety, but for the most part, legalism has gone underground. It does not exist so much in theological formulations or church creeds. Legalism today is more subtle and practical, rather than theological or confessional. Hardly anyone would come right out and say, "We are saved by our good works," because that would go directly against the clear teaching of Scripture. Instead, the practical legalism of today is something only faintly detected in subtle accents placed on the Christian faith. You may hear it when people talk more about what we should do, rather than what Christ has done. You may hear it in evangelism that exhorts people to change their ways rather than come to Christ. You might hear it in preaching that emphasizes moral values over faith and repentance. You may see it in cliques of Christians who define themselves by what they do or do not do, rather than what they believe. In most cases, these are people who will proclaim that salvation is all of grace, but, in practical terms, they try to add some human effort, some human merit, or some behavioral qualification into the equation.

Again, this is not a well defined group in the Christian world. It is a subtle emphasis, and, truth be told, it is a common struggle. Everyone, in some way, struggles with the temptation of practical legalism. We struggle with it because we sometimes fail truly to appreciate the real depth and fullness of God's grace in Christ. The righteousness of Christ alone covers us completely, and the grace of God toward us abounds in full measure through faith in Christ alone. However, the pride left within us will sometimes lead us to doubt whether this is enough. The old nature still loves to take credit where credit is not due. You may hear this little whisper at times in your own mind: "You have to do *something* to make yourself stand out in God's eyes. You have to do *something* to make yourself a little more salvation-worthy than all those horrible sinners around you." You may never say these kinds of things, but you might catch yourself thinking this way sometimes. If you do, the antidote to practical legalism is to remember that salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone is a *full and free* salvation. There is nothing that can be added, and the glory belongs to God alone. We must return again and again to this central truth, and if we do, we will be on solid ground to resist the practical legalism that would otherwise so easily ensnare us.

Now, let us turn to examine another kind of legalism. In our definition we said, "Legalism is a contortion of the true gospel whereby a person tries to earn *or maintain* his salvation ... by keeping the law of God." Some would freely say, and truly believe, that salvation is all of grace and never can be earned, but still live as though it is up to us to keep ourselves from falling out of grace by our own obedience. In other words, salvation is by grace, but perseverance is by works.

Before going further, we have to be clear that obedience to God's law in the Christian life should naturally flow from true faith. We know that the moral law of God is not a means of salvation, but it is a guide to covenant life. We obey from the heart, out of thanksgiving, and ought to be always growing in our obedience. Paul says in Ephesians 2 that we are "God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Good works are God's will for the Christian life. So, obeying the law out of faith is not legalism.

I would also add that scrupulous attention to the detail of God's law is not legalism. Some think that legalism is when Christians try too hard to be obedient, and the solution is to not try so hard. "Just love Jesus," says the antinomian, but Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." We are to *strive* in our obedience. Jesus said something noteworthy regarding this in Matt 23:23, 24 (read). He said, "These you should have done" (faith, mercy, justice), "*without leaving the others undone*," (the tithe of mint, cummin, and anise). Putting the point in terms of verse 24, they strained out a gnat and swallowed a camel, but swallowing gnats is no virtue either. In other words, Jesus was saying that they got the details right in some respects, but details were all they had. So it is not their scrupulosity that Jesus was condemning. Faith, mercy, and justice are the heart of the matter, but the tithe of mint, cummin, and anise is not unimportant. There are the weightier matters of the law, but that does not mean we can willfully ignore the details. The point is this: our obedience must begin with faith and be motivated by love. If it is, we ought to be scrupulous. If it is not, then the details do not matter.

The point is that obedience goes with the Christian life, even a growing, scrupulous obedience. This is not legalism. But we have to recognize humbly that our obedience is not what keeps us in God's favor. That idea *is* legalism. We saw from Ephesians 2 that God Himself is the author of our good works. We cannot take pride in, or find personal merit in, any obedience that we might render to the Lord. As we serve the Lord and seek to obey Him, it is He who is working His will within us, and it is He who is keeping us in the pathway of life. 1 Peter 1:5 says that we are "kept by the power of God through faith for salvation." We are kept by God, not sustained by our own obedience.

Again, the Pharisees are an obvious example of this kind of legalism. Most believers would not outright say they are saved by grace but sustained by their own good works. Most would not say that, be we are weak enough that the thought might cross our minds. Have you ever caught yourself thinking of your sanctification as a zero-sum game, in which a bad deed negates a good one, or a good deed makes up for a bad one, and you are still in the faith as long as your good deed column is just a little longer? This is legalism. We need to remember that obedience is important, but also that it is God's work within us. Obedience can *confirm* the genuineness of our faith, but it is not our good works that keep us in God's favor. If we find the fruit of obedience growing in our lives, we should simply and humbly thank the Lord for His work within us, and give Him all the glory.

Thus far we have looked at two different brands of legalism. The first we might call "justification legalism," because it tries to combine faith and works as the *ground* of our salvation. The second we might call "sanctification legalism," because this legalism tries to *maintain* God's grace through obedience. What we conclude is that our obedience neither saves us nor sustains us in God's eyes. Instead, our obedience to the law in the life of faith is God's work in us, confirming that we are His, and confirming that His gift of faith to us is genuine. All the glory belongs to Him.

There is yet a third kind of legalism, or rather a third motive for it, and that is to appear righteous in the eyes of others. In Matthew 23, Jesus identified this as a motive of the Pharisees – they wanted to "outwardly appear righteous before men." You see, some legalism does not even consciously take God into account. It is not related to salvation or sanctification, but rather, it is a purely prideful attempt to *look like* you are keeping the law, for the sake of your reputation, or to gain favor with some people by appearing more righteous than others. This is perhaps the lowest of all the motives that legalism can have – to take God's perfect law that reveals His righteous character, and just pretend as though you are keeping it for the sake of earthly appearances.

Again, the Pharisees are something of a grotesque caricature of how far this legalism can go, but it is a temptation that is alive and well. As Christians, we live in community with each other. We worship together, have fellowship in many contexts, and thus we live out our Christian lives in the view of each other, at least to some degree. We value the opinions that people have of us as Christians, and that is only natural, but it can become a subtle influence on our motives for obedience. For instance, have you ever kept the Lord's Day in a certain way, only because of the people who were with you? Or maybe rendered some service to the church, mainly because of the people who would see you? Or perhaps attended a church gathering, only because you did

not want your absence to be conspicuous? If we are honest, we will all have to admit that we have done such things. This does not mean that our faith is a gross hypocrisy, but what it does mean is that we need to be careful to always examine our motives for obedience. We need to obey the Lord from the heart, in thanksgiving, because we love Christ. We should, of course, value the opinions of our brothers in Christ, but if it is the opinions of men that begin to move our obedience, we begin to flirt with legalism.

This is one of the main points in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6, Jesus talks about good works, prayer, and fasting – three very visible elements of our obedience. His point in every case is that we should make these *invisible* – not doing these things in the sight of others, or for the sake of their opinion. When you do a good deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. When you pray, go into your room, and pray in secret. When you fast, wash your face and anoint your head, so that you do not appear to be fasting. In every case, Jesus is telling us to render our obedience to God alone, and not for the sake of earthly appearances. Again, we need to obey the Lord from the heart, in thanksgiving, because we love Christ. We need to examine ourselves often for this motive, because anything less flirts with legalism.

There is one last element of our definition of legalism that we have to consider:

Legalism is a contortion of the true gospel, whereby a person tries to earn or maintain his salvation, or appear righteous in the eyes of men, by keeping, *and often adding to*, the law of God.

This element of legalism is also exposed by Christ in Matthew 23. The Pharisees had many extra-biblical rules about taking oaths. For instance, they said if you swear by the temple you are under no obligation, but if you swear by the *gold* of the temple you are obligated to keep your oath. This is obviously a foolish and contrived rule, especially in comparison to the plain and powerful teaching of Jesus, who said, “Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’” We are not to swear oaths as a pretense, or contrive complicated rules to define truth and falsehood. The teaching of Christ is lucid and simple – just be a man of your word and honest in all that you say. In contrast, the Pharisees provide an example of what legalism tends to do: it takes the clear and powerful law of God and adds these contrivances, these petty attachments and human accessories, as if the law of God is not clear enough or complete enough on its own. This was the legacy of the Pharisees. Their many rules were further developed and eventually codified into the Talmud – an encyclopedic addition to the law of God, which still defines Judaism today.

Paul dealt with another strain of such legalism in the book of Colossians. There were some who wanted to subject themselves and others to extra-biblical regulations, and make these regulations a standard of Christian behavior. “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle” is how Paul characterized their rules. These were not Judaizers campaigning for the kosher laws. Rather, they were gentile converts who brought in their own rules for the Christian life, and essentially added to the law of God. Paul writes in Colossians 2:23 that “these things have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion and false humility...but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.” This is an apt description of the additions to the law that legalism makes. There is an *appearance* of wisdom – again, it is about appearances. It is *self-imposed* religion, rather than coming from the Word of God. And there is a *false* humility involved. Paul sums up the case by

saying that such rules are of “no value,” but we know such additions to the law are worse than meaningless. Scripture pronounces a curse on anyone who adds to, or takes away from, God’s law (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18-19).

Legalistic additions to God’s law were an obvious challenge to the early church, but once again, legalism has taken more subtle forms today. We live in a more permissive atmosphere, where perhaps the greater challenge is the misuse of Christian liberty, rather than legalistic additions. The prevailing “spirit of the age” will often dictate the changing tendency either to add to God’s law or to subtract from it. We seem to live in times of subtraction. Christian liberty is often used as a cloak for vice, and the term “legalist” is often misapplied to any scrupulous believer.

Still, the basic legalistic temptation to add to God’s law is not something that we have outgrown. It is usually found in those debates over “doubtful things,” as Paul calls them, in Romans 14. Paul was referring to matters of conscience, over which Christians may disagree, about the propriety of eating this or drinking that, or observing special occasions. His point is that when it comes to these “doubtful things” we should bear with one another in love. We should be careful not to give offense, or to take offense, in these matters, but always make sure that we live with a clear conscience before the Lord. Note well, here, that there is a Biblical category called “doubtful things.” The Apostle Paul, who could have commanded one thing or another, and could have ended the debate over these “doubtful things” – did not. Instead, he coined the term “doubtful things,” he left it at that, and urged us to deal kindly and patiently with one another’s consciences.

To the legalist, there are no “doubtful things.” Everything is cut and dried – what a Christian should eat, drink, wear, and do, down to the last detail. Of course, the Bible gives us some clear direction on many of these points of behavior, but the legalist has an unwritten rule to fill in the gaps where the Bible is silent. Paul gives us the warning not to do this – to not judge each other on doubtful things, or make up rules that bind people’s consciences. There is a category of doubtful things – a Biblical category – and it is not our place to “solve” these matters by making up our own rules, adding to God’s law, to create new norms of Christian conduct. It is our place to be patient with one another in these matters, not cause others to stumble, and to live with a clear conscience before the Lord. Besides, legalism never removes the doubt from doubtful things. Adding to God’s law never brings peace and agreement. It only stirs up conflict even more. When we have our unwritten codes of conduct that go beyond the word of God, we have become practical legalists. This type of legalism is not all that hard to spot. Without any Scriptural basis for their rules, legalists all lean on each other, and all together on nothing, often making an extra-biblical rule the most prized and visible point of their fellowship. It is a sad thing to see believers hold each other at arm’s length over doubtful things, when we need to spend what time and energy we have on edifying one another.

We have gone through and exposited our definition of legalism, which is this:

Legalism is a contortion of the true gospel, whereby a person tries to earn or maintain his salvation, or appear righteous in the eyes of men, by keeping, and often adding to, the law of God.

If this is a fair and Biblical definition, then the antidote against it is also clear. In conclusion, let me suggest three simple points for guarding our hearts against legalism:

1. Always return to the power and purity of the true gospel, which is “by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph 2:8, 9). Return to this point again and again in your thoughts, prayers, and conversation. Never loose sight of it!
2. Always examine your motives for obedience. Whatever obedience you render to Christ, accompany it with the prayer that He alone would be glorified in it. Take particular care for secret obedience – the kind in which your left hand does not know what your right hand is doing.
3. Remember that “the law of the Lord is perfect” (Ps 19:7), and it does not need our subtle additions. When it comes to “doubtful things,” take particular care to show patience and love to others who have a different conscience.