

LEGALISM

by Ray C. Stedman

Our study today is legality, or legalism. There is much misunderstanding on this subject by many. We tend to think that everybody else has it, but that we don't. We often treat it like the common cold. We don't understand what it is or how to cure it, but almost everyone suffers from it, and we find it to be very highly contagious. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to liken it to hay fever, since I see that some of you are joining me in a chorus of snuffing and sniffing and wheezy breathing. Legality can be very much like that. It comes upon you and you hardly know what has happened. But there it is. The symptoms are suddenly present and you don't know what to do with it -- certainly not how to cure it -- and so you suffer through it, but don't know what is wrong.

But legality is one of the favorite weapons of the enemy. He loves to get Christians to be legalistic, for then he has destroyed their enjoyment of the Spirit and he can use them to spread havoc among a generation or a company of believers, and ruin a vital, active, and growing Christian group. That is exactly what happened in Galatia, and is what drew forth the letter to the Galatians from the Apostle Paul. Here was a group of young Christians who had a fantastic beginning. Their response to the preaching of the apostle was heartwarming. They had given themselves totally to Christ. Paul was greatly enthusiastic about this group of growing young Christians. But, after a while, word came to him that legality had set in, legalism was taking its toll. What had been a bright and marvelous testimony of the grace and glory of God was being turned into a dull, apathetic group of religionists -- cold, barren, and empty, almost devoid of spiritual life.

That is what legality will do. Legalism destroys! It did then, and it does the same thing today. I know of no affliction in Christendom which is more widespread, and more devastating in its destructiveness, than this. Across the world today many churches are sunken into a pall of boredom and futility largely because of the legalistic spirit which has throttled their spiritual vitality.

Legalism can also be described as *false Christianity* because that is essentially what it is. It uses Christian language and biblical terms. It sounds evangelical. It loves to use phrases like "evangelism," "fundamentalism," "biblical literalism," and such. It sounds Christian, and looks Christian, but it is emphatically not true Christianity. It is a spurious fake, an imitation Christianity, an empty, hollow counterfeit of the real thing. It is a burdensome drag upon the spiritual life that creates a sense of bondage and guilt. It is a sickening, nauseating fraud in the eyes of others. God describes it in the Scriptures as a stench in his nostrils. That is what legality really is. We ought not to be proud of it in any degree although, strangely enough, I find Christians boasting of their legalism. They don't call it that, but they nevertheless boast in what is in effect a legalistic spirit. But God does not boast of it. He finds it disgusting. Yet it is so widespread.

Why is that? Why should it be so universal? Surely the answer is that the enemy strives diligently to keep us in ignorance as to what legalism really is. We recognize certain forms of it and try to divest ourselves of those, but then we are not aware of other forms of it that are gripping our lives and holding us in bondage. So while we are denouncing legality on one side, as practiced by others, we ourselves are practicing it in another form. Thus it spreads its noxious influence throughout a local Christian body, across the nation, and throughout the entire worldwide church.

How can you recognize legalism? That is the question we want to zero in on. We must first understand that since legality is basically false Christianity, then you can never recognize the false unless you understand the true. That is where I want to start.

What is real Christianity? What is Christianity as the Scriptures set it forth -- true Spirit-filled living? Let me

attempt a definition:

True Christianity is to manifest genuinely Christ-like behavior by dependence on the working of the Spirit of God within, motivated by a love for the glory and honor of God.

That is the genuine article. You will notice that it has three essential elements, and without all three it becomes legality. If it fails in even one point it is nothing but legality:

1. First, there is an expected pattern of behavior. There is a law, if you like, a code, to which we are expected to conform. Many Christians make the mistake of thinking that to be free from legalism you must become free from any law whatsoever. Nothing is further from the truth. The Scriptures never endorse that notion. I know that we sing,

Free from the Law, O happy condition
Jesus hath bled, and there is remission,

but what we are talking about is not freedom from the Law but freedom from the curse of the Law. That is something quite different.

There always must be law. This is a law-governed universe because the law reflects the character of God. God himself is reality. God is behind all things, and his character is the law which governs everything. Therefore Christians must always be related to law -- the law of the character of Christ, of the law of the Ten Commandments -- it is the same thing. The Ten Commandments simply describe the nature of God's character. So true Christianity isn't freedom from the existence of law. There is always a standard, always a code of conduct to be observed. That is essential. But be careful what the standard is! You can go wrong selecting the law. You can be legalistic in the standard you have set.

2. The second necessary element is a sufficient and adequate power. That is absolutely essential to true Christianity. The whole glory of the gospel comes in right at this point. The good news is that God has given us a sufficient and adequate power, indwelling us, available to us at all times, so that we never have an excuse for not being what we ought to be. In the Spirit of Jesus Christ, indwelling us, we have what it takes -- a sufficient and adequate power.
3. The third essential is a motive which moves us to action -- a powerful, compelling hunger for the glory of God, an urge that God be honored and glorified. If I can put all the foregoing in another way, the true Christian life is fulfilling a law by means of a unique power because of an overwhelming desire. It requires:
 - o An outward standard or code of behavior,
 - o An inward power which makes it possible to meet it, and
 - o A motive which drives us on to do so.

But it takes all three. You cannot manifest genuine Christianity without all three. If it fails at any one point it immediately becomes legality. The other two can be perfect and yet it still will be legality. You can go wrong at any one of three places.

Let me go over these and show you what I mean:

First, one form of legality is to have the wrong standard. Legality then becomes making unwarranted or unnecessary demands on yourself or on someone else, especially in areas which are not prohibited in the Scriptures. That becomes legality.

There is a standard which is prescribed. As I have mentioned, the Law of God never changes and it is always right, always applicable and relevant to a Christian. For instance, it is always wrong to murder, or to lie, or to steal, or to commit adultery, or to covet your neighbor's things. These are always wrong. They are never right. There is no way ever of justifying them.

But there are other areas in which we are given a great deal of personal liberty, and it is legalism to make standards (particularly for someone else) in these areas. Here we must be careful, because, for ourselves, it is

proper to set standards or rules which apply to us. When we have difficulty with some situation, or we discover a weakness within ourselves, it is wise to make a rule for our own protection:

- "I will not go to bars because I have a weakness toward alcohol. I tend to lose control and get drunk, therefore I won't go there." That may be a perfectly proper rule for your life.
- "I find myself easily inflamed by pornographic literature," you may say, "therefore, I won't read that kind of stuff. I find myself sexually aroused to the point where I want to do the wrong thing, so I won't read literature or go to movies which do that to me." It is right to set these kinds of rules and limitations upon yourself. And you will find they will change as you grow as a Christian.

But legality comes in when a group of Christians makes rules for each other, or for anybody else. That is what is wrong. That becomes legalism. We may sit down and explain a situation to somebody and ask him, "Would you agree to observe this standard of behavior if you work or study with us?" If he says "Yes," then he has agreed, and has adopted the rule for himself. But the Scriptures are careful not to command behavior in certain areas.

When the Corinthians wrote to Paul they asked, "What about these Christians who are eating meat offered to idols?" A group of them were upset about this and they wrote to the apostle, saying, "We don't think that is right; to us that is demon worship." But Paul wrote back and said, "Now be careful!" He said, in effect, "It would be the easiest thing in the world for me, as an apostle, simply to say, 'Yes, you are right, don't eat meat offered to idols,' but I am not going to say that. What I am going to say is that here is an area where each man must be fully persuaded in his own mind. You can't make rules for each other, and you have to honor a weaker brother's conscience. If he is troubled by a certain action then don't flaunt your liberty in his presence, but be careful of one another and love each other."

So it becomes legality for Christians to levy standards of achievement or behavior or spirituality upon others. Today this involves matters concerning clothing styles, length of hair, certain demands of ritual observance -- like whether you may cut your lawn on Sunday or not, whether or not it is right to eat meat on Friday, food and behavior restrictions -- all these things become legality when they are legislated upon somebody else. These are areas in which we are left free to be guided by our conscience, instructed by the Word of God in general principles. We are free to counsel one another, and help one another, but not to legislate. It is wrong, absolutely wrong, to do so. It becomes legality when we make unwarranted demands upon others in an area not prohibited by Scripture. This focuses upon the *what* of an issue, what it is you are supposed to do, and you can be legalistic at this point.

A second form of legalism (and it is the same basic thing, even though it takes another form) has to do with the power upon which you rely in order to act. Legalism is also the making of quite proper demands, but making them on those who have no awareness of the proper power it takes to fulfill them. That becomes a very subtle form of legality because it is always based on a proper demand. It is in the realm which Scripture authorizes -- thou shalt not murder, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not lie, and so on -- a moral code which is approved of in the Scriptures. But even in that area it is wrong to make a demand upon someone who doesn't understand the power by which it is to be met. It becomes legality.

Do you see how subtle this can be? The actual behavior can be exactly the same in the case of a legalist or of one behaving as an authentic Christian. They both may be real Christians and their behavior may be exactly the same, but one is legalistic and the other is not. It is what is going on inside that is the issue in question. It is a matter of inner reliance. What are you reckoning on to meet this demand? Are you counting on your ability, your own adequacy, your talent, your personality? Is that what you are reckoning on in order to accomplish what is expected of you? Well, if you are reckoning on anything other than the activity of God at work in you, you are a legalist!

We all do this from time to time. Who has not found himself falling back into some form of reckoning upon himself -- either his ability (to try to show someone what he can do) or his inability (to use as an excuse). If you do this you immediately become a legalist. This is focusing now on the how you are going to do something. The most widespread form of legality in the Christian church is the flesh -- trying to do something before God which will be acceptable to him.

The flesh is the old life, the natural life inherited from Adam, with its apparent resources of personality, of ancestry, of commitment, of dedication, and so forth. You can do all kinds of religious things in the flesh. The flesh can preach a sermon. The flesh can sing in the choir. The flesh can act as an usher. The flesh can lead people to Christ. Did you know that? The flesh can go out and be very zealous in its witnessing and amass a terribly impressive list of people won to Christ, scalps to hang on a belt. The flesh can do these things but it is absolutely nauseating in the eyes of God. It is merely religious activity. There is nothing wrong with what is being done, but what is terribly wrong is the power being relied upon to do it. That is legality.

That is why, in any Christian activity, you have to be careful that your inner reliance is on God, and not on you. Otherwise it comes out all wrong and makes all the difference between heaven and hell, life and death. You can do exactly the same thing that someone else is doing, and, if you do it with a sense of reliance on anything other than the Spirit of God, what they do will bless people but what you do will curse them. It is the very same action, absolutely the same. What you do one moment, trusting in God's Spirit, will bless people and strengthen them and bless your own life and enrich and fulfill it, but the very next moment you can do exactly the same thing in the power of the flesh, and it will be damaging and destructive and hurtful to others and to you. That is why you need to recognize the subtlety of all this and to be aware that God looks not at the outward appearance, as man does, but at the inner heart. What is going on inside is all-important to God.

It is paramount that we understand that. Because other Christians around you approve of what you are doing is no sign at all that what you are doing is acceptable to God. What you are doing must be done out of a reliance on the power he provides or else it is nauseating, religious hypocrisy, in his sight, and it will ultimately prove to be that in the eyes of others as well.

Now let's move to the third area. You can go wrong in the motive which moves you to do things. Legality is also the fulfilling of external requirements for reasons of self-exaltation or personal merit. Here we are focusing on the *why* of what you do. You must be right in *what* you do, *how* you do it, and *why* you do it.

Why do you do things?

Are you trying to build a reputation for yourself?

Do you want a name as a spiritual Christian? -- and so you let it be known

- How many Bible verses you memorize each week,
- How many hours you spend in prayer, and
- How much you give to the missions.

That is exactly on a par with the religion of the Pharisees. This is what Jesus is highlighting in the Sermon on the Mount -- men who love to be seen before men instead of being content to be visible only to the God and Father who sees in secret. If what is motivating you is a desire to gain preeminence, some prominence as a Christian, if you long to have your name blazoned before others, published around the world, known here and there, and if you love to table-hop at Christian conventions (believe me, I know plenty about this in my own heart), this is legality. It is a stench in the nostrils of God. It will end up producing only death in your life and increasing the shame and reprobation of Christianity before the world.

Of course, combinations of these failures are possible. You can be wrong at two points as well as one, or at all three -- and then you are really a legalist! You can be an obvious legalist as well as a subtle one. But it is all legality. It is what the Scriptures fight unstintingly and what the enemy is clever to cover over and make look like something good.

Now we are ready to attempt a definition of legality which I hope will fit all the circumstances we have looked at:

Legality is a mechanical and external behavior growing out of reliance on self, because of a desire to gain a reputation, display a skill, or satisfy an urge to personal power.

That is legality. It is religious performance, scrupulous and meticulous in its outward form, but, inwardly, as Jesus described it, "filled with dead men's bones," {Matt 23:27}. It is relying on self, personality, background, training, and talent or skill instead of the Spirit of God. And it is operating for and on behalf of one's own personal glory. That is full-orbed legality.

The thing that is appalling to us is to remember that there is no way to cheat in this matter. God knows our hearts. He sees us as we are and he turns off the power immediately when a legalistic spirit is present, even momentarily, in our life. What we do out of that spirit never produces anything of value in the kingdom of God. We can't fool him. We may fool others, but we can't fool him. God acts immediately upon the basis of what he has said he would do, and so legality results always in death.

That is why it needs constant evaluation on our part.

You can't live the Christian life and never take a look at yourself.

If you go on week after week, year after year, never examining yourself, never asking, "What kind of a Christian am I? Where am I before the Lord?" you cannot escape a legalistic spirit. We must always be asking, "What kind of attitudes do I manifest? What kind of disposition do I display to others?" You must ask these questions repeatedly. That is why the Scriptures say, "examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith," {cf, 2 Cor 13:5}. The life of faith requires this.

Furthermore, it requires an openness to the help of others in this respect. Not only are we to examine ourselves, but we are to let others examine us, because it is amazing how little we can see ourselves. At times we can. We all have moments of truth. You know how they feel. Moments of truth come when you are suddenly aware of what you are. But God doesn't leave us to depend on these alone. He also gives us the rest of the body of Christ to help us. So pay attention to what others say about you -- especially if they say it in love and not in harshness. Listen to their appraisal. They may be seeing something that you are not seeing, and it is important to consider and to face honestly what others make clear to us.

We don't like that, do we?

We all want to deal with God directly.

We don't mind his seeing us. We don't mind his telling us what is wrong because he does it in secret. But it really gets to us when he chooses to use someone else to do it. As Oswald Chambers says:

"God never allows you to choose the scene of your own martyrdom. If you object to the fingers by which he crushes his grapes, you will never become wine poured out to bless the hearts of others."

So don't object to them. Allow others to minister to you and to help you with their insights into your life. That is why we need the body.

Well, then, what is the cure of legality? Suppose you find it in your heart -- and we all will. If you can go on week after week and never find any evidences of legality in your life you are utterly blind. There is something wrong with you, because legality is there. It is present. It is always waiting to be manifested at any moment of weakness, and there are plenty of moments of weakness, aren't there? But what do you do with it when you find it?

The Scriptures suggest a very simple and unfailing remedy: Repent and believe -- that is all. Repent of it. Change your mind about it. Don't justify it. Don't excuse it. Don't call it something else. Don't try to cover it up and pretend that it is something acceptable. You may fool the people around you but you won't fool God. He knows. So repent of it. Admit it. Say so, openly and freely. And then believe that God has already taken care of it, that death need not follow. Commit it to him and out of death will come resurrection; from death will come life. The moment you acknowledge the death, the resurrection immediately follows -- always. God brings to life that which would otherwise be barren and dead. That is the secret of handling legality.

Bill Newton will forgive me if I share a little story that he told me just before the service, because it illustrates this so beautifully. Bill was reminding me of the time when the Salt Company (a Christian folk-rock music group) was here a year or so ago in our Body Life service. He was troubled by the music. It wasn't the style to which he was accustomed. He didn't like the beat and he couldn't understand the words very clearly, so the music wasn't ministering to him very much. When he looked over to his wife, LaVose (who plays the piano for us so wonderfully), he saw her bowed in prayer. He found a moment to ask her, "What's troubling you?" She said, "You know, the Lord just said to me that he isn't as uptight over this as I am." Now that is repentance, exactly!

That is what it means. It is facing the fact that God's attitude is different than ours. Something may bother me but it doesn't bother him, and therefore it is my attitude that is wrong, not his. A belief in and acceptance of God's attitude -- that is repentance.

How much grief we would be spared in our lives if we gave people the same liberty we expect for ourselves. We don't want somebody else to tell us how to dress in order to come to church. There is no rule in the Bible that says you must wear shoes to church or anything of the sort. I know this is not a problem with us any longer, but there are plenty of places where it is. And I am sure that we have lingering moments of other kinds of legalism. But I am not trying to judge anyone, I simply want to say, "Let's look at the legalistic attitudes we find within us and judge them in the light of the Word, because legality is death." Legality is hypocrisy. Legality is phony Christianity. It is a false way to trying to appear right, and, therefore, it is a stench in the nostrils of the God of truth who loves to have people be honest and true as he made them to be.

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