

What Legalism Is Not

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[0:00] Well, we've heard the last two weeks about pleasing God.! No, we're beginning just a two-week study.! I think it will just be two weeks on one of the latest little booklets published by Robert Spinney! and the church in Hartsville, Tennessee, the Grace Baptist Church, Tulip Press.

And as always, these little booklets have very interesting covers. Here you can see the shackles in a brick wall.

And the question is, are you legalistic? Are you legalistic? Grace, obedience, and antinomianism, the title of the book. And Spinney's own introduction to the topic is so good that I simply want to read it to you.

He says, I formerly served as a professor at a conservative Christian college. Perhaps three-fourths of my students had been reared in evangelical homes and attended Bible-believing churches.

I recall one day in an American history class when we were studying the New England Puritans. My students had read Edmund Morgan's *The Puritan Dilemma*, a delightful biography of John Winthrop that discusses the Massachusetts Bay Colony's founding in the early 1600s.

[1:21] While not endorsing everything that every Puritan ever said and did, I nonetheless explained to my students why I regard many of the Puritans as spiritual giants.

J.I. Packer's right. We need the Puritans today because they display a spiritual maturity that is exceedingly rare. But I could tell during our class discussion that despite Morgan's favorable biography of Winthrop, my students did not share my respect for the Puritans.

In fact, my students were surprisingly suspicious of these Christians whom I regarded as my spiritual heroes. I asked my class, was there something wrong with the Puritans?

You don't seem to like these people. After a long silence, one of my students spoke up. Well, you know, the Puritans were, they were legalistic.

I asked, they were legalistic? He answered, yeah, they were legalistic. Well, I asked the entire class, do you all agree with that? How many of you think that the Puritans were legalistic?

[2:31] Almost every hand went up. On the chalkboard, I wrote in big letters the word legalistic. Then I asked my class, would someone please define that word for me?

Silence. Come on, just get us started with a definition, I coaxed. What is part of this words meaning? No response. I continued, How many of you have ever used the word legalism before? All hands went up. I asked, how many of you think the Puritans were legalistic? Most hands went up again, although a little less confidently this time. Can't you tell me what this word means?

Finally, one student haltingly said, well, they were just like, um, so concerned with obeying God all the time. And as he spoke, you could tell he realized this wasn't a good definition.

I asked my class, isn't it good to obey God all the time? What's wrong with obedience? Nobody said a word.

[3:41] I asked again, can't anyone give me a biblical definition of this word? Finally, one of my students spoke up. Well, it's not a Bible word, but he's looking for at least a definition that would fit into Scripture's terms of what that word means.

Finally, one of my students spoke up. Well, I think you've convinced us that we really don't know what the word legalism means. Let me tell you about those students. Although this was a conservative Christian college, they rarely used the word justification.

And they even more rarely used the words regeneration and sanctification. But my students could deploy the word legalism with the ease and confidence that comes with frequent use.

Since that day, numerous conversations have persuaded me that those students were not unusual. Legalism is a word that we Christians throw around with reckless abandon.

It seems like every churchgoer can use the word legalistic with zest. Yet when I ask Christians to define the concept, I invariably get mumbled and imprecise answers.

[4:51] If you ask ten Christians to define legalism, you would likely receive ten different definitions. Ed Withrow first drew my attention to this article when it was an article on the web.

And I read the article and thought, that's hitting the nerve we need to have sounded forth. And I wrote to Rob Spinney. I said, Rob, that ought to be included in one of your little booklets.

And I was encouraged to see that they have done so because it has been my experience, too, that Christians use this word legalistic in an altogether incorrect way.

It is an abused word. And Spinney divides his treatment of the question, are you legalistic, into two parts. Legalism, what it is not, and then what it is.

A whole lot gets called legalism that is just normal biblical Christianity. And because that is being wrongly labeled as legalism, a whole lot of real legalism is passing without being detected.

[6:00] So both situations are not only unfortunate but dangerous. We can't afford to think of biblical Christianity as legalism, like the fellow in the story, or in the illustration, in the classroom, that to be legalistic is to obey God all the time, to be so concerned about obedience.

We can't afford to identify biblical Christianity as legalism, nor can we let real legalism in our life go undetected and untreated.

So this week, legalism, what it is not, and next week, legalism, what it is. I believe that man spoke for many in evangelicalism today when he spoke of very careful obedience to the law of God as being legalistic.

And so, the lesson starts then this morning, what legalism is not. It is not being careful to obey all God's commands all the time. Spinney says, we see a believer applying the Bible to a real life situation.

He applies God's commands in practical ways in his life. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. You shall not covet.

[7:20] Well, he's careful to obey God's commandments. Even God's seemingly little instructions. He's serious about his Christian life, perhaps more serious than we are.

This brother has convictions or practices that seem odd to us, perhaps different from ours. And we don't say it publicly, but we think he's way too serious about obeying God.

He should lighten up. And we look at that brother and think, he's legalistic. Or again, Spinney says, a friend encourages us to apply God's word to a seemingly small issue.

He may suggest that we make financial restitution for a sin we committed years ago. He may suggest that our clothing is immodest, that we need to obey traffic laws, or that we should be more faithful, excuse me, more faithful in attending the church's prayer meeting.

And this all strikes us as being too picky. An unnecessarily conscientious application of Bible teaching. And we regard this careful obedience as legalism.

[8:25] Or when a pastor confronts a member of the church for neglecting to obey one of God's commands and calls on him to walk in obedience to the commands, they might be called legalistic.

That's a legalistic church. Those are lawmen, legalistic pastors. But in Matthew 28, 18 through 20, the Lord Jesus calls upon his church to do three things.

You're familiar with the passage. What are they? The Great Commission. What are we to do? All right, that's the second thing. What's the first thing? Before we baptize them, we need to make them, to make them disciples, make disciples of the nations, baptize them.

And what's the third thing the church is charged to do? All right, teach them to obey all that I have commanded you. It strikes me that sometimes we may think that we're just to teach them all that God has commanded.

But that's not what he says. If all our job is as a church is to teach all that God has commanded, then if you can recite the Ten Commandments, the summary of God's moral law, we could say, well, we've done our job.

[9:34] We've done our third duty of teaching you what God's commandments are. But it doesn't say that, does it? It says, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded.

So, pastors and the church leaders not only have the right, they have the mandate from the king and the head of the church to be seen to it that their people not only know what the law of God is, but that their lives are being conformed to it, that they are obeying the law of God.

So, it's not legalistic for a pastor to come to one of his members and say, brother, here's the law of Jesus. You need to walk in line with this, in this area of your life.

That's not legalism. That's obedience to the head of the church. But that's the sort of thing that is often labeled legalistic. There was a time when careful, uncompromising obedience was regarded as heroic, as faithful.

And today, it's often called legalistic. Think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who were held up for us in the Bible of examples to follow.

[10:44] What did they do? They refused to compromise on one of God's commands. They would not bow down to a graven image. They refused to cut corners, to make any exceptions to God's commandment.

And their stubbornness got them thrown into the fiery furnace. Be like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the Bible says. Or think of Daniel. He would not defile himself with a king's meat.

Oh, come on, Daniel, chill out. Just this once. Here you are, you're away from home. Surely this is an exception to the rule. Or his habit to pray three times toward Jerusalem.

And though the king's command says, no one's to pray but to anyone but to me. Daniel still prayed three times a day, as he had done before. And people would say, Daniel, you're being legalistic. You're being stubborn. The Bible says rather, dare to be a Daniel. Dare to stand alone. And heed God's command. Don't we think of Moses before Pharaoh.

[11:53] And Moses has the job of coming with the word of Jehovah to this great monarch and saying, Jehovah says, let my people go that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.

Pharaoh wasn't about to let them go. And he suffered plague after plague. After seven plagues that devastated the land, he's ready to cut a deal with Moses. And so he says, okay, so who's going?

And Moses says, our young and old, sons and daughters, flocks and herds. Pharaoh says, no, just the men can go. Leave the women and children. Moses is not interested in compromise.

And so a plague of locusts follows that strips the land bare. Then the plague of three days of darkness, utter darkness. And Moses is called in again to Pharaoh to strike a deal.

Okay, go worship the Lord. Even your women and children may go with you. Only leave your flocks and herds behind. And I can just hear an Israelite saying, oh, come on, Moses, don't blow it now.

[12:57] Don't be so legalistic. Don't be so stubborn and inflexible. If you'll strike a compromise, we could be out of here. At the end of this day. But you know Moses' response.

What was it? You all can go, but just leave the flocks and herds behind. And Moses said what? Not a... Anybody know?

Hoof. Not a hoof will be left behind. How does that strike you? Inflexible? Legalistic? Stubborn?

That's the sort of thing that's held up for our imitation in the scriptures, isn't it?

Now, sometimes our stubbornness and inflexibility and our lack of compromise is sinful. Other times, it's holy. What makes the difference?

I want a response from you. When is it right and when is it wrong? This kind of stubbornness that we're seeing in these examples. What's the purpose of it?

[13:57] What's the objective of it? Okay. The purpose or objective makes the difference. Some more. The motive. The motive. Good. Love for self or love for God.

Good. Good. Ah. Is that that at the end of the day, the dividing issue? Is this just a personal preference?

Is this just something in the way that I like it? And if I'm stubborn and unwilling to defer to another, it's sinful. But if it's a command of God or a biblical principle, then to stand, to plant my flag and to be willing to die on this hill is a virtue and not something legalistic.

Well, sadly, such distinctions are often missing today and any lack of compromise, any stubborn unwillingness to give in is viewed as being a fault, as being legalistic.

There's enormous pressures today to fit in. Always has been and always will be in this world until Christ returns. To be politically correct, to be religiously correct, to not stand out as different in our world.

[15:20] And so when society comes and lays its expectations upon us on how we use the Lord's day, we don't want to appear different and legalistic. We want to fit in with the society around us.

Not so. These who are held before us in Scripture. Caleb, the Lord says, my servant Caleb, because he had a different spirit and has followed me fully, I'm going to bring him into the land which he entered and his descendants shall take possession of it.

Caleb, one of the few exceptions of the men of the original Israelites that got to go into the kingdom or into the promised land. Why? Because he had a different spirit. He followed me wholeheartedly. Caleb was a bit odd.

He was a bit out of step with the rest of the group, wasn't he? He was different, of a different spirit. And what was the difference about him? Well, when others were following God's commandments halfway, Caleb was going all the way.

When they were following half-heartedly, Caleb was following wholeheartedly. When they were compromising and cutting corners and making excuses for their disobedience, Caleb was following the commandments fully.

[16 : 34] And the Lord does not condemn him for being legalistic. But praises and rewards him for following him fully with a different spirit. King Saul, on the other hand, did compromise on God's command, didn't he?

And what strikes me is that Saul would be praised in many churches today because he did basically everything that God said, didn't he? He just fudged on a few matters.

But let's not get too legalistic. We don't want to keep the letter of the law. We just keep the spirit of the law. How much sin is going under such terms today?

After all, the sheep and cattle spared were for sacrifices to the Lord. Does that not fulfill the spirit of the law? We don't want to be bound to the letter. What did Saul learn about obedience that day?

Question? Waiting for your response. Mark? Amen. And to hearken is better than the fat of lambs.

[17 : 41] So, it was because he didn't obey specifically all the way because he just spared Agag and some of the cattle and sheep.

He lost the kingdom that day. He learned the value that God places on obedience to his commands to every jot and tittle of his commands.

It's not legalism. It's what God requires of us. So, we have both positive and negative examples in the scriptures to show the importance to God of careful obedience to his commands.

That's not something that should be considered as legalistic. Now, some think when we come to the New Testament, the whole scene changes then. You see that in the Old Testament, you did have the importance of obedience to God's commands.

But under the New Covenant that Christ has inaugurated, obedience somehow to commandments is diminished. The importance of that is diminished. And that is simply ignorance of the Word of God.

[18 : 51] And there is a lot of that today. What did Jesus say in John 14, 15? If you love me, keep my commandments. That doesn't sound like commandment keeping is diminished in the New Covenant, does it?

You are my friends if you do what I command. John 14, 15, 14. Then obedience to commandments is not legalism.

It's the way to show I love Jesus, my Savior. It's a way to show that I'm his friend. Lord Jesus was a preacher of both law and grace.

Commandments and grace. You read that Sermon on the Mount. It's full of law, isn't it?

Commandments. Because the commandments express the righteousness of the kingdom that the king is here to inaugurate.

This new covenant, this kingdom that he's come to inaugurate. What is the righteousness of this kingdom? He goes to the law. He lays down the laws of God. He comes to the end of that sermon and says not everyone that says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom, but only he who does the will of my father who is in heaven.

[20 : 12] And that will of the father in heaven is revealed where? In the laws of the kingdom. In his commandments. His apostles learned from the Savior and also called for obedience to God's commands.

Remember our study in the first epistle that John wrote in chapter 2 verses 3 and 4. Listen to this apostle of love and the way he speaks so freely of commandment keeping.

1 John 2-3 God love is truly made complete in him.

This is how we know we are in him. Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus walked. so law keeping in the new covenant is a distinguishing mark of the Christian whereas law breaking is a sign of unbelief in fact John says in chapter 3 of that epistle that you can know whether one is a child of God or a child of the devil based on their obedience or lack of it so commandment keeping

is not in itself legalism rather it's what biblical New Testament Christianity is all about Paul says so then circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing keeping God's commands is what counts 1 Corinthians 7 and 19 and by the way the commandments that the New Testament is talking about what is this law very often in fleshing it out they're quoting the Old Testament commands aren't they that's what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount about the sixth commandment murder and the seventh commandment adultery this is the righteousness of the kingdom it's it's not that Jesus has set aside every commandment in the Old Testament and said oh that's just for the Jews

I've got a new set of commands for the the church no no that's that's not it at all he he rather freely quotes the Ten Commandments or from them in establishing what is the righteousness of the of the New Covenant what is it that the king expects of his citizens Paul does the same in Romans 13 when he talks about love fulfills the law what law well you shall not murder you shall not commit adultery and he starts listing the Ten Commandments James does the same thing in James 2 8 through 13 that if you break keep the whole law and yet offend in one point you're guilty of all what laws James are you talking about if a man commits adultery does not steal but he commits adultery he's going right back to the Ten Commandments and so the New Testament does not throw aside all Old Testament commandments

[23:29] Spinney says we're having a discussion with a brother in Christ and he suggests that we re-examine our ethical behavior in some area we ask our friend for the biblical warrant for making such reforms and he points us to a passage in the Old Testament and we respond by saying oh but I'm not but I'm a New Testament Christian Jesus fulfilled the law so I don't have to obey any part of it all Old Testament laws are abolished and we walk away thinking our brother who values the Old Testament moral commands is legalistic no the Bible doesn't allow us to do such things so the New Covenant does not do away with law keeping on our part rather it ensures that it will happen in all who are in the New Covenant of Christ everyone who's a believer a true Christian will walk in the ways of God's commandments how do we know that because he ensures it he works in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure what is the promise of the New Covenant

I will put my law within them and on their heart I will write it you see the New Covenant doesn't set aside the law it rather internalizes it and writes it right on the heart of everyone who is a part of the New Covenant so that you not only have an outward commandment coming to us but we have an echo in our hearts a desire yes Lord I don't want to have any other gods besides you yes Lord I don't want to bow down to any image I don't want to misuse your name I don't want to misuse your day I want to honor mother and father you see there's something in the heart it's written in the heart that's the guarantee of the New Covenant it's one of the things that makes the New Covenant better than the old not every Israelite in the Old Testament who was a part of the Old Covenant had the word the laws written in his heart but in the New Covenant they all will know the Lord they'll all have his law put in their hearts turn to Ezekiel 36 another New Covenant passage promise of the New Covenant and what it would bring and I

I don't think that a more specific word could be given to this question about what is it to be legalistic than Ezekiel 36 26 and 27 Israel has departed from the Lord and the Lord is calling them to repentance in the midst of of this he speaks of a of a new day he speaks of the day of the New Covenant and what he will do in verse 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and to be careful to keep my laws you see what God promises to do in the New Covenant and again it's grace isn't it because he does it I will do this I will put my law on your inward parts

I will put my spirit in you and cause you to follow my decrees and I will cause my spirit in you to make you careful to keep my laws we should never think of being very careful to keep the laws of God as something legalistic in and of itself that's the very thing that the spirit of God has been put in the heart of every New Covenant believer to do to make us very careful that we don't put our foot down anywhere but in the commandments of God we walk in his in his laws and we're careful about it God himself makes us careful obeyers of the law by the power of the spirit I like Spinney's question to the class can you obey God too much to even ask the question is to answer it isn't it you can't be too careful in keeping God's commands that's the aim of the New Covenant turn to Matthew 23 we're going to see the

Pharisees next week Spinney calls them poster children of legalism and we know Jesus often takes the Pharisees to task in the gospels they are indeed legalistic as we'll see next week but I think we

need to be very careful and understand precisely what was it about the Pharisees that made them legalistic or we can go far askance in defining legalism it wasn't that the Pharisees were too careful in obeying the laws of God that made them legalists look at Matthew 23 1 to 4 then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples and you remember the seven woes of this chapter upon the Pharisees and teachers the teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses seat so you must! [28 : 35] obey them and do everything they tell you but do not do what they do for they do not practice what they preach they tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them!

they say when they teach you the law of God you must do that don't throw that out that's throwing the baby out with the bath water then we come down to verse 23 and listen to this woe upon the Pharisees and teachers of the law woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees you hypocrites you give a tenth of your spices!

justice mercy and faithfulness I think sometimes we come away from this passage and we think you know what Jesus is saying to these guys you guys are going way too far in obeying God's law yes he calls on you to tithe he calls on you to give a tenth of all your increase but come on guys your garden herbs!

but I didn't finish the verse did I what does Jesus say about these who are doing this you should have practiced the latter justice mercy and faithfulness without neglecting the former the tithing of your garden herbs he's not condemning them for going too far in obeying God's commands he is condemning them for not going far enough in fact they are ignoring huge blocks of God's law the weightier matters like justice doing what is just toward the widow toward the orphan they were taking advantage of people entering into old widows houses and for pretense of prayer pillaging their homes ignoring justice ignoring mercy kindness ignoring faithfulness justice so again we need to be careful that we don't just think that any careful obedience to the commands of God is legalistic no that's not what our Bibles let us define legalism as actually the Pharisees didn't go far enough and that's the charge all the way through the gospels we don't have time to tease that out but they were lowering the standards of righteousness so do not murder just means keep your dagger out of your neighbors back Jesus says no no it doesn't it means you don't do anything to harm your neighbor you don't even hate him you don't even have murder in the heart you see they kept lowering the standard to something that they could manage something they could feel good about themselves and feel faultless before God well Matthew 5 we have to come back to this passage because it speaks to the very essence of what we've been talking about does the new covenant under Jesus

[32 : 28] Christ diminish the role of the law and obeying the law and here in Matthew 5 17 through 20 Jesus here he is inaugurating the new covenant bringing in the kingdom he's the king he's come he's described the citizens of his kingdom in the beatitudes and now he's describing the righteousness of the kingdom verse 17 do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets the Old Testament I've not come to abolish them but to fulfill them I tell you the truth whenever Jesus says that he's saying something that is rather remarkable perhaps shocking to his audience I tell you the truth until heaven and earth disappear not the smallest letter not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished now hear this anyone who breaks or abolishes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven for

I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven everybody thought that Pharisees were such good law keepers Jesus says no way they're all skimping they're all cutting corners making their traditions ways to break the commands through their traditions no unless your righteousness unless your law keeping goes higher than theirs you will no way enter the kingdom of heaven and anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments you see we must never think that that's just a little commandment it's not worthy of our strict obedience no Jesus says that we're to obey and to each other to obey even one of the least of his commandments that's what greatness in the kingdom is regarded as so if careful obedience to all

God's commands all the time is legalistic then Jesus Christ himself was the biggest legalist of all John 14 verse 31 the world must learn that I love the father and that I do exactly what my father has

[illegible]