

Legalism or Love?

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Those who do not want to obey the teachings of the New Testament often accuse those of “legalism” who dare emphasize obedience to God’s commands. *Legalism* is defined as “strict, or excessive conformity to the law.” In the religious context, this definition refers to God’s Law. One who truly loves the Lord should consider it a compliment to be called a “legalist” by the foregoing definition. It is impossible to practice “excessive conformity to the law,” as long as it is the Law of God one is determined to preach and practice. Often people use *legalist* to refer to some who overemphasize one part of God’s law to the neglect of others or those who elevate a human opinion to the level of Divine law. In these senses the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ time were “legalists” (Mat. 15:3, 6–9; 23:23). Some of the same types of “legalists” are around today. They ought to be exposed and condemned per Jesus’ example.

However, a clear distinction needs to be made between the foregoing loose usage of *legalism* and the Scriptural doctrine of obedience to the commands of the Gospel. **We dare not equate insistence upon obedience with legalism**, for God has ever required obedience of mankind. From the beginning, disobedience has equaled sin—and it still does (1 John 3:4; 5:17). There is no salvation apart from obedience (Heb. 5:9). A fiery judgment awaits those who “know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 The. 1:7–9).

There is much more. New Testament teaching makes love of Christ and obedience to Him inseparable. “If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments...; He that loveth me not keepeth not my words...; If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love...; For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments” (John 14:15, 24; 15:10; 1 John 5:3). Was Jesus telling us we must be “legalists” in his emphasis on obedience? Whoever teaches that the commands of Christ are unessential to salvation (e.g., “Only believe and ask Jesus to come into your heart, and you will be saved”) **does not love the Christ**, regardless of his claims to the contrary.

This is the crucial place where the “faith-only salvation” doctrine breaks down. A person may believe in Christ and still refuse to obey Him for lack of love (e.g., those who say “Lord, Lord” [Mat. 7:21], the rulers [John 12:42–43], the demons [Jam. 2:19], et al.). All such mere “believers” will be lost, according to the Lord (Mat. 7:22–23). Let it be clearly understood that it is **legalism** in its most basic sense to insist upon careful obedience to Christ. Let those, therefore, who emphasize the essentiality of strict obedience to God and His Son not be ashamed to be called “legalists.” **Love** of Christ demands just such “legalism.”

This matter relates to the faithful service we should render in Christ's kingdom, also. I have watched in dismay through the years as some Christians seek other things first besides the kingdom (Mat. 6:33). On a given Lord's Day there will be some who choose to stay in bed, go fishing or hunting, visit relatives, or just stay home—with little or no thought of their duty to Christ. Do they no longer believe in Christ? They may still "believe" in a very shallow sense, but they have a serious **love** problem. They need to become legalists.

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