



Legalism

Its Fruits and the True Grace of God

Based on a message preached by Emanuel Lapp

When one speaks of legalism, it is necessary to define the term. The word “legalism” is not found in the Bible. There are a few things that bother me about how this word has been used many times, and this has been one of the stimulations that caused me to study it. To start with, let’s look at three points:

1. A definition of “legalism.”
2. The fruits of legalism.
3. The true grace of God.

You may have seen the terms “legalism” and “liberalism” used together in a word picture. Supposedly, “legalism” is the one ditch and “liberalism” is the other, and somehow we need to find our way between the two. Quite frankly, that word picture bothers me, because it shifts the focus from off of what the Word of God would have us focus on.

When we think of fruits, we need to remember that fruits are not the tree itself, but rather the natural end result of what has gone before. You don’t plant thorns and get figs, Jesus reminded us. You plant figs and then you get figs. Neither do you get grapes from thistles. So, legalism has its fruits.

The true grace of God also has its fruits. 1 Peter 5:12 speaks of “the true grace of God.” This kind of grace is that which teaches us that “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.” Tit. 2:12 This is the true grace of God. There is a lot of false grace being preached today.

What legalism is not

First of all, I would like to give a disclaimer as to what legalism isn’t. Legalism is *not* a righteous man who feels good about what he is doing. When the Pharisee prayed “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican,” he was not commended for that. He said, “I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.” But he was not commended for that. It is never recorded in the Scriptures that he was a godly or righteous man. But much more, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for looking good on the outside—doing some

right things—but their hearts were full of excess and they were devouring widow’s houses, and behind the scenes evil was happening. All of this was cloaked over with religion.

The beginning of legalism

Turn to Genesis chapters 2 and 3. Legalism, or being righteous by law, gives us the picture that there is a righteousness established by man and a righteousness established by God. These two righteousnesses are not equal. In Genesis 2:15-17, we read:

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

In Genesis 3:1-7:

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which *is* in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, and that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make *one* wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they *were* naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.

Reading on in the same chapter, we come to realize that these aprons were not sufficient; they did not cover enough. So God slew an animal, shedding blood, to cover their nakedness.

This was the beginning of man *deciding for himself what was right and wrong.*

They were told to not eat of this tree of “the knowledge of good and evil.” The serpent came and cast doubt upon God and upon what God had said, telling Eve, “Yea, hath God said?” This put a question on God’s word and what God had said. Eve began to look differently upon the tree than what she had before the serpent had spoken to her, tempting her. Eve then turned and looked at the tree and began to question God; then she reached out her hand and took of the

fruit and ate of it, and gave to her husband, and he ate also. And their eyes were opened. No longer were they directly under the guidance of God, and they began from that point to *decide for themselves what was good and what was evil.*

**The essence
of legalism is
to decide for
ourselves what is
right and wrong.**

And that—*deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong*—is the essence of legalism. Making practical applications to biblical principles is NOT legalism. But ignoring those principles, in deference to our own ideas, IS legalism.

Legalism continues

God later gave commandments to people in the Old Testament, and His people were to do them and live by them. But they found it impossible to live a righteous and holy life according to the commandments of God. And so they were confronted with two choices. They could cast themselves upon the mercy of God, as David did. Or, they could lower the standard that God put upon them, to a level they could reach on their own strength by the flesh.

That has been the continual struggle of humanity. We tend to bring down the level of God's law so that we can attain it by our own strength. But that is the essence of legalism, *deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong.* 2 Corinthians 10:18 tells us, "For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth." Jesus Himself tells us, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not." The scribes and the Pharisees had a cloak of religion, but they did not do what God said.

Righteous actions are not legalism

A righteous man is not a legalist! John tells us in 1 John 3:7, "Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous." Righteousness is a fruit of the Spirit. And the righteous should feel good about living righteously. It feels good for a child to be obedient to his parents, and it does *not* feel good to be disobedient. The same applies to our obedience to God: it

feels good to obey, and it is right to feel good about obeying Him.

We should feel good about the right deeds we are doing. However, history and Scripture indicate that just feeling good about what we are doing is not a safe gauge. It is possible to feel good about doing wrong, just because we are used to doing it or because we have been taught that way. That is the reason we are told to have our "senses exercised to discern both good and evil." He. 5:14 These "senses" need to be exercised in the Word of God, not in our own reasonings and justifications and ways.

Through my life I have met a lot of different types of people, spoken with them and observed others, from atheists and drunkards to Christians and Muslims and Buddhists. I have found a common strain running through all of these people. I have found a common thread of legalism, although it varies some in intensity and style.

The atheist

There is the atheist legalist. Somehow in his self-will or bitterness, he has decided to believe or reasoned with himself that there is no God. And he has cast aside the Word of God as legitimate and has begun to *decide for himself what is right and wrong.* He has no place to turn to now for direction in the matter of right and wrong, except into himself and his own thoughts. He has no foundation, no absolutes, because he has cast away all restraints that God would put upon him. He fully and freely reaches forth and partakes of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and trusts in it. He has rejected God's word. One person called it "the cold, logical reasoning away of God." And I agree with

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As David Wilkerson once said:
"When the church calls
obedience legalism, it is at the
height of apostasy."**

that. We need to be alert, because when we begin to turn away from what God has said, we are taking steps toward atheism, and away from God. Our hand begins to stretch out towards that tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

There was a time in the history of Israel when "every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Ju. 17:6 In effect, that is the same as atheism. It is unbelief in God as the ultimate authority. And every time we take a step towards *deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong,* we

are rejecting the living Word of God, written in the tables of our heart, and are stepping towards unbelief. This happens sometimes in the context of discouragement, when people fail us. Church leaders, parents, friends, teachers ... Let's not react and begin to do "that which is right in our own eyes."

The humanist

The humanist legalist trusts in his own reason. They believe that man is basically good, and all he has to do is become in his mind who he is capable of becoming. The humanist has trusted his own reason, knowledge, and mind, and has rejected the mind of God. This man also fully and freely partakes of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The modernist

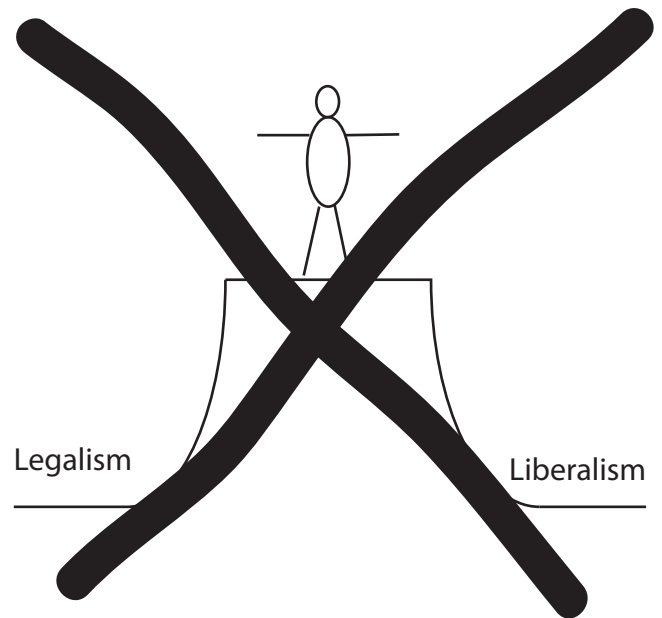
There is another type of legalist, the man who claims to be a believer, but uses his carnal mind and understanding to interpret the Word of God, and does not let the revelation of the Spirit of God guide him. So, anything in the Bible that does not make sense to his carnal mind, he explains away. The feeding of the five thousand is an example: since he does not believe in miracles, he just explains them away. Supposedly, the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand happened naturally, when the people heard Jesus' teaching and began to love one another and started sharing their lunches. Thus, the five thousand were fed in the modernist view. Well, that is a nice story, but that is not the Bible version, but rather man's reason; man exalting himself above God, *man deciding for himself what is right and wrong*.

God has given us reasoning powers. But they are to be used under His direction. God calls to humanity, saying, "Come now, and let us reason together." Our reason was designed to be used under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The willful sinner

Next we will look at the legalist who lives in sin, the one who cannot overcome his "besetting" sin. I have met many people like that, and I have found a common strain in those who do not repent and find grace in Jesus Christ. I have been in this place myself, justifying myself for many years in my sin. The drunkard has many "reasons" for being where he is: "Nobody loves me ..." and all kinds of similar "reasons" why he stays a drunkard. The husband who falls into adultery has "reasons": "My wife is a nag ..."

All sinners who do not find the grace of God in the mercy of Christ will find justification for their sin, *making their own set of rules and reasons*. This happens because no one can live very long in sin—knowing that he is sinning and is lost, and understanding the consequences of lostness—and continue being comfortable with himself. These people will find justification for their sin, sooner or later.



The common analogy presented with "legalism" as one ditch and "liberalism" as the other is not a valid picture, and causes people to miss the meaning of legalism. Legalism is NOT the opposite of liberalism.

Some of the worst sinners that I meet in prisons will have justifications of some sort for their actions. The only ones who do not have a self-justifiable reason for their sins are those who are repentant and are open to receive the Word of God. This is the place we all need to come to ... and stay at for the rest of our life.

The self-willed

Then there is the self-willed legalist. He has a will for what he wants. He says, "I want, therefore I get." So in his heart he knows he has to have a reason for what he does. He searches and finds a reason to get what he wants to get. He soon convinces himself and freely runs after the things he desires, *deciding for himself what is right and wrong*. There are things that feel good to the flesh that we need to avoid and not create an appetite for. We can feed that appetite to the point where it grows beyond reason and our ability to control it. That is why we need to make a choice to stop when we can stop and have our ways committed unto God.

You know, that first beer or first drug or first "whatever"; that first step away from God may be a small step. But it is still a step away from God. It is a step towards the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We may be able to make a choice in that first or second step. The grace of God may not immediately abandon us. But as we continue that choice away from God, the appetite will take over and we will lose control of ourselves.

The religious legalist

The Muslim weighs right and wrong in the balances. He tries to do more good than evil, and hopefully the good will be more than the bad.

The problem with this is, again, that he has *decided for himself what is right and wrong*. He is not depending on what God says. I have talked to quite a few of that strain of man who decides for himself what is right and wrong. I have found the same strain in Buddhism, bowing before a god of stone. It is also in Hinduism, where there is a god for every occasion and need, supposedly.

The Apostle Paul says that he was, as “touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.” Yet, he was apprehending God’s people and putting them into prison and consented to the stoning of Stephan. Now Paul said he was “blameless,” but I believe that was in the context of his own understanding, as far as he could understand the law. He lived according to the Jewish concept of the law, and had *his own interpretation as to right and wrong*.

Legalism can be defined as, “Scrutinizing the law to look for a loophole for disobedience.”

We see that manifested when he was called, since God told him, “It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.” Ac. 26:14 There were things pricking Paul, and he finally broke down and admitted it. At that point, Paul left his own interpretation of right and wrong and received God’s interpretation. He later confessed that he did “count them but dung, that I may win Christ.” He had confidence in the flesh, but that confidence had to die, that confidence in our self that we are naturally born with.

A covering for hidden sin

As I mentioned at the start, the picture of “liberalism” as one ditch, and “legalism” as the other, bothers me. This is because it takes the focus off of what legalism truly is and tries to get us to look at it as something that it is not. I have known many “liberals” and many “conservatives” in my life, in all kinds of churches, and I cannot say that the “liberal” is any less “legalist” than the conservative. We find them in both “camps.” The legalist is a legalist because he *decides for himself what is right and wrong*.

We are tempted on one hand to be concerned about some things that God has said, but only a few things that He has said. Yes, we are concerned about things that are true and right. We focus on those few points, but then we don’t concern ourselves with other things, perhaps things that are hid-

den. I have seen this happen over and over. Religion then becomes a cloak for sin.

In Matthew 23, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees. He had spent much time with them, trying to get them to see their sin and their need. Finally, the day came to show them plainly what was wrong, and the whole chapter is dedicated to that rebuke. Religion to them had become a covering, and I fear that same thing happens to Christianity. Too often we look good on the outside, but the inside is full of sin. Too often we eye the “liberal” and compare ourselves with them, and feel good about ourselves.

The Word of God touches every area of our life, not just a few areas. We cannot be real strong in one area and really weak in another, without departing from the Word of God.

The “liberal” legalist

Well, there is the “liberal” legalist, and he is busy legalizing that which is right in his own eyes. He has his desires and goals, and loves the world, and busies himself justifying his love. Step by step, step by little step, legalizing to himself what he wants. There is a continual push to draw near to the world, and one excuse after another is concocted to accommodate it. He may speak of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, but step by step he is heading for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Balaam, who “loved the wages of unrighteousness,” was a “liberal” legalist. He just could not accept “no” from God, and kept pushing and pushing until God let him go. And he went, even though he could only bless the children of Israel. But the Bible tells us very clearly that his heart was not right with God. And sure enough, he found a way to get around what God was telling him not to do: curse Israel. He found a way, a loophole, in the Word of God, by teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel.

Balaam was rebuked by the dumb donkey, but I don’t know which is more surprising: the donkey talking, or Balaam answering him. It is the same with the “liberal” legalist. I don’t know which is more surprising: that they do the things God has forbidden, or that they expect to get by with it.

But the rules keep changing for the “liberal” legalist. He takes small steps, but always in one direction. And as the outward things change, inward things change. A person does not begin to wear wolves’ clothing without become a wolf. Sheep do not wear wolves’ clothing. But we are warned that wolves wear sheep clothing. But we never have the opposite warning, that a sheep will begin to wear wolves’ clothing, deceiving everyone around them.

Grace into lasciviousness

Jude 4 tells us, “For there are certain men crept in un-awares, who were before of old ordained to this condemna-

tion, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.” These men turn grace into a license to sin. This happens when we *decide for ourselves what is right and wrong*. When we legalize what God hasn’t, we deny our Lord Jesus Christ. That is what these men in Jude 4 did.

Legalism has its fruits. Fruits manifest themselves in the atheist, who has no absolutes. It has its fruits in the sinner, who keeps on sinning. It has its fruits in the self-willed, who continues pushing for his own pleasure and getting overcome by it. It has its fruits in the “conservative” religious man, who continues in his wrong thinking, often very sincerely so, but covering over his hidden sin. It has its fruit also in the “liberal” man, who legalizes his way to the world.

The true grace of God

The true grace of God teaches “us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.” Tit. 2:12 We find in Romans 12:2 Paul speaking of a transformed mind, that we “may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” There is a way that God has for us that is good for us, and He knows what that path is. We don’t always know, and we need to remember that so that we do not run to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and start *deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong*. The transformation of our mind happens as we focus on the Word of God, and turn to Him ... someone outside our own self.

In Romans 7:24, we see a man under the law, struggling and not finding victory. “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” But he came to the place where he surrenders it all, and exclaims, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.” He had begun to realize earlier in chapter 7 that even though he puts his mind to serve the law of God, there is another law in his flesh that brings him into captivity to the law of sin in his members. He found that his mind in and of itself was not strong enough to overcome sin.

But he finds his answer in chapter 8: “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.” The Law of Moses could not give power over sin, but the life of Christ Jesus is the overcoming power. There was nothing sinful with the Law of Moses in its place, but it is self that is the problem. Self could not live up to the Law’s demands.

Fruits, the proof

The Spirit of Christ has fruits, works by which we can understand whether it is the Spirit of Christ that moves a



Balaam was a “liberal” legalist, who, although he obeyed God in blessing Israel, later accepted money when he thought of a loophole as to how he could curse God’s people. God had not explicitly forbade him from giving advice to Balak about how to trap God’s people into sinning against God. Balaam followed the letter, but not the spirit, of God’s command. This is legalism.

man or not. Galatians 5:22 names off some of these virtues, and if we have these coming out of our life, then Christ lives in us. “And if Christ be in you, the body is dead [its desires do not control] because of sin; but the Spirit is life [His desires control us] because of righteousness.”

“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” Pr. 3:5-6 This is the opposite of “legalism”—when we lean not to our *own decisions as to what is right and wrong*. The next verse tells us, “Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil.” It is not possible to achieve to the full righteousness of God by the law, by determining in our own eyes between the good and the evil. It is not possible to live up to the law in the flesh; we need the Spirit of Christ.

The distinguishing feature between legalism and the true grace of God is that grace will produce a full spectrum of fruit, while legalism will excuse itself from certain aspects.

“By their fruits ye shall know them.” Mt. 7:20 ~