

Legalism— a Smokescreen

by Mike Allison

An interesting but sad exodus from standards is taking place in Bible-believing circles today. Some preachers now preach that standards for living are a matter of “personal conviction.” If you think something is wrong for you, it is wrong. If you think it is all right, then it is all right.

It has become common to hear preachers denounce those who uphold standards by calling them “legalists.” A preacher from California recently cried out while preaching on Galatians 5:1-5, “I hate legalism.” But he was referring to those who preach about standards for living. Another chided preachers for making such a big deal over “regional convictions.”

If I am against something they are not, I am branded a legalist. But “legalism” has also become an excuse to circumvent the Word of God. A phrase often used by those who think right and wrong is simply a matter of personal choice is, “I’m not convicted about it yet.” Statements like this sound spiritual and may please the ears of those who have been wanting to indulge in things Christians have stood against for

No doubt you have heard some believer refer to another believer as a legalist. The words “legalism” and “legalist” are used so freely today that they have lost their true meaning.

years, but they demonstrate a lack of Bible knowledge concerning the Law and its importance to the child of God.

The dictionary defines legalism as a “strict, literal or excessive conformity to the law.” However, theological legalism has a different definition. Theological legalism is a strict adherence to the Law as a means to be saved or to keep saved. Simply, any addition of works by man to the finished work of Christ to bring or keep salvation is legalism. The upholding of standards that are in conformity with the Word of God is not legalism.

The Scriptures clearly teach that the Law condemns us (see Gal. 3:10), has no power to save us (see 2:16,21), and cannot keep us saved (see 3:1-5). The Law

does, however, point us to the Lord Jesus Christ where we can be saved by God’s grace through faith.

The Proper Attitude About the Law

But to say that we as believers no longer look to the Law as the standard for holiness because standards are now only a matter of personal conviction is to misunderstand the Law.

Jesus set me free *from* sin. He did not set me free *to* sin. And sin did not change when I trusted Christ for salvation. Nor did sin change when Jesus died on the cross. “Sin is [still] the transgression of the law” (I John 3:4).

Romans 6:13-19 clearly sets forth our responsibility to holiness in living. We are not to yield our members to unrighteousness but to righteousness. Righteousness did not become personal conviction when I trusted Christ for salvation. It is still decided by the Word of God, regardless of my convictions. After stating we “are not under the law, but under grace,” Paul then asked the question, “Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace?” He answered his own

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question with a resounding, "God forbid." Even after an individual trusts Christ, sin is still decided by the Word; and he is not to sin!

When a person trusts Christ as his Saviour, God does not throw His Book out the window and say, "Now that you are saved you can do anything you want to do. It does not matter if I said it was wrong before; now you are free to live by your conscience. You must quit only if you feel it is wrong." Some quickly reply, "We do not serve in the oldness of the letter of the Law but in the newness of the Spirit."

Jesus gave us the answer to that objection in Matthew 5:13-48. Several times He referred to the Law, saying, "Ye have heard that it was said, . . . but I say unto you." A simple look at the passage shows Jesus was not giving His OK to throw out the standards of the Law, but rather He taught that obedience goes farther than just the outward appearance. Obedience should come from a right heart attitude.

Jesus compared our testimony to salt and light in verses 13 to 16. Then He reminds us that He would not destroy the Law but fulfill it. He also taught the immutability and endurance of the Word of God. Then Jesus showed that following the letter of the Law was not enough. One can have outward obedience with inward sin. However, inward obedience will also be manifested by outward obedience.

He began by using one of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not kill." Jesus did not say we no longer were to obey it. He taught that man can break the Law in his heart in the sight of God while obeying it outwardly in the sight of man. Man was not given a license to disobey the Law unless he felt "convicted about it." He was to obey it outwardly and to be careful his heart attitude was right inwardly.

Next, Jesus brought up another

of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (vv. 27,28). Again, Jesus did not do away with man's responsibility to obey, but rather He explained that outward obedience does not prove true obedience. Man is not even to look on a woman and lust after her. Our responsibility goes much farther than obedience to the letter.

Jesus then used the same arguments concerning marriage and divorce, swearing an oath, personal vengeance and loving others. In each case, the Law was not put aside for "personal conviction"; but rather a greater obedience was expected. Actually, the spirit of the Law goes farther in holiness than the letter of the Law.

Therefore, even though outward obedience to the Law does not prove a right inward relationship with God, a right relationship should be accompanied with nothing less than outward obedience.

The Profitability of the Law

Other New Testament verses proclaim the Old Testament's authority as a standard of holiness for believers. Paul wrote to Timothy several years after Christ's death on the cross: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works" (II Tim. 3:16,17).

The first part of the verse proclaims the origination and authority of scripture. Scripture comes from God. Literally, it is God-breathed. Lest we be careless in studying this verse, notice Paul was talking about "all scripture."

Even though it seems elementary, remember that "all scripture" includes every letter of every word of every chapter of every book of both the Old and New Testaments.

Just as "all scripture" is the subject of the first verb, "is given," it is also the subject of the second verb, "is profitable." The verse tells us all scripture is profitable for four things: doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness.

If "all scripture" is profitable for doctrine, then every chapter of every book of both the Old and New Testaments is profitable for doctrine. Is there a conservative anywhere who doesn't use Old Testament verses to prove doctrine? But now the inconsistencies begin to fly.

Second Timothy 3:16 did not limit Old Testament verses to being profitable only for doctrine. Notice, they are also profitable for *reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness*.

Truly, we are no longer under the Law, in that it can no longer condemn those who have trusted Jesus Christ for salvation; but we are still to receive its reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness for daily living. In addition, according to the Sermon on the Mount, we should not only be willing to obey it outwardly, we should be willing to go even farther in righteousness with obedience from the heart.

We receive much instruction in righteousness from the Gospels and the epistles, but that is not the limit of our instruction since "all scripture" is profitable for instruction in righteousness.

Peter demonstrated his agreement with this premise for New Testament Christians. In I Peter 1:14-16 the apostle wrote: "As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy."

Peter, writing some 30 years after Christ's death, when admonishing believers to live holy as

Christians, supported his statement by quoting Leviticus 11:44. Why are Christians to be holy? "Because it is written."

I can hear someone complain, "But Peter, that's in the Old Testament. We're not under the Old Testament anymore. We have liberty in Christ."

Some preachers and Christians throw the scripture "profitable for instruction in righteousness" out the window, using the excuse of "liberty." Obviously, they are misusing liberty and denying the authority of scripture, given to guide our lives in holiness, because of its location in the Old Testament.

Some object, "But Christ is the end of the Law according to Romans 10:4." Such objection is a careless reading of the passage and verse. Verses 1 to 3 explain how the Jews had gone about to establish their own righteousness by works. They thought they could be righteous with God by being good enough. As far as being righteous in our standing before God is concerned, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth" (v. 4). A righteous standing before God is only possible through Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the Law. "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). Romans 10:4 explains how a man may be considered righteous before God for salvation. It is not denying the use of the Old Testament as "instruction in righteousness."

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When Paul preached separation to the Corinthians in his second letter (6:11-18), the whole foundation of his argument was a principle laid down in the Old Testament. When he stated, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers," his argument was based on Deuteronomy 7:2-7 and 22:6-12. When he wrote, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate," he was speaking from Isaiah 52:11. Did this make Paul a legalist? No, he was a biblicist. He was using the Law "lawfully," as instruction in righteousness.

Solomon proclaimed that lying lips were an abomination unto the Lord (see Prov. 12:22). When Jesus completed His work of redemption through His death, burial and resurrection, did He make lying an acceptable practice for Christians? Absolutely not. Malachi 3:6 states of God: "For I am the Lord, I change not." What was an abomination to Him in 950 B.C. is still an abomination to Him in the 20th century. Proverbs 12:22 is still good "instruction in righteousness" for the child of God. It is not "legalism" to say a Christian shouldn't lie.

Moses wrote: "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination" (Lev. 18:22). Did such perversion cease to be an abomination to God when Jesus died on the cross? Is it legalism to preach against homosexuality? Is it legalism to say it is sin for a Christian to commit homosexual acts? Absolutely not! Sin is sin whether a person is convicted about it or not. God's Word, Old or New Testament, is the final determinant of right and wrong regardless of a person's conviction.

Was Paul a "legalist" when he told women to "adorn themselves in modest apparel" (I Tim. 2:9)?

Was Paul a "legalist" when he said it was a shame for a man to have long hair (see I Cor. 11:14)?

Was Paul a "legalist" when he told bishops to be the husband of one wife (see I Tim. 3:2)?

Was Paul a "legalist" when he told the Colossians to "put off . . . anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication" (3:8)?

Was Paul a "legalist" when he told the Ephesians that "fornication, . . . uncleanness, . . . covetousness, filthiness, . . . [or] foolish talking" were not to be named among them (see Eph. 5:3,4)?

Was Paul a "legalist" when he told the Corinthian church to turn the adulterer in their church over to "Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (I Cor. 5:5)?

Was the Holy Spirit a "legalist" when He told the New Testament church to "abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication" (Acts 15:28,29)?

Was James a "legalist" when he wrote: "Speak not evil one of another" (James 4:11)?

The list of questions like this could go on and on. Obviously, they were not "legalists" when they preached standards.

We do not have to apologize for the verses on holiness found in a part of the Bible people do not want to accept today. It is time we get back to using "all scripture" for what it is profitable for: doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness.

I am not a legalist. Salvation is by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ, not of my works. It is totally of grace. When a person trusts Christ, he is no longer condemned by the Law. He is free. However, God still expects holy living by His people. They are to follow the Word of God.

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LEGALISM

WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT

LEGALISM

WHAT IS IT?

The term "legalism" or "legalist" is not found in the Bible, but the serious error of legalism is certainly dealt with, especially by the Apostle Paul who ever and always boasted in the cross and championed the grace of God (Gal. 6:14; 1:6). Perhaps the best way to see what Paul had to say about how the flesh wrongly uses the law is to read carefully through the epistle to the Galatians.

Legalism and Justification

It is the deadly error of legalism that teaches that justification or salvation is by the works of the law. The legalists of Judaea said it this way, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Paul clearly confronted this error in Galatians 2:16--"Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."

The law can show us how unjust we are (Rom. 3:20b) and thus it can show us our need for justification, but the law can never justify:

"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight" (Rom. 3:20). "If righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain" (Gal. 2:21).

Legalism and Sanctification

The law cannot justify; neither can it sanctify. The law can show us that we are unholy but it can never make us holy. The key to living the Christian life is not found at Mount Sinai, but it is found at Mount Calvary (Romans 6; Gal. 2:20).

Paul argued strongly that the Christian life must be continued on the basis of faith, not on a legal

basis: "This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:2-3). The Christian life is to CONTINUE just as it COMMENCED! "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him" (Colossians 2:6).

Holiness does not come by seeking to keep the law in the energy of the flesh. C.H.Mackintosh defined legality as "the flesh attempting to carry out the precepts of God." How successful is the flesh? "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not" (Rom. 7:18 and see verse 24).

The Believer and the Law

Two key facts must be kept in mind. First, the believer is not under the law (Rom. 6:14). In fact the believer has died to the law that he might live unto God (Gal. 2:19; and see Rom. 7:1-6). He is not under the LEGAL RULE, but he is under the NEW CREATURE rule (Gal. 6:15).

Second, the believer is not lawless (Rom. 6:1-2). We died to the law so that we might be married to Christ and out of this relationship we bring forth fruit unto God (Rom. 7:4). The life of a true believer should manifest FRUITFULNESS not LAWLESSNESS.

Those legalists who try to put themselves under the law do not keep the law (Gal. 6:13; Acts 15:10), but those believers who walk in the Spirit keep the law by way of the fruit of the Spirit: "That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:4 and compare Galatians 5:22-23).

LEGALISM

WHAT IT IS NOT

Being obedient to God's specific commands is not legalism. "And hereby we do know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4).

Living a holy life that is set apart unto the Lord's service is not legalism. "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification [holiness], that ye should abstain from fornication....For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness" (1 Thessalonians 4:3,7).

Living a life separated unto Christ and separated from the fads and fashions of the world is not legalism. "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Romans 12:2).

Conforming one's life to be in harmony with certain standards decided upon by Spirit-led leaders of a local assembly of believers is not legalism. "That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well" (Acts 15:29).

Forgoing my personal rights for the sake of my brother is not legalism. "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak" (Rom. 14:21).

For further study: 1) How to Live the Christian Life (25¢). 2) What Is the Believer's Rule of Life? (50¢). 3) Guidance for Living—67 Tests (20¢).

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