



But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. – Matthew 15:9

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## **A New Definition of Legalism**

An acquaintance in Utah, knowing I had recently committed my life to Christ, first introduced me to the concept of legalism. He told me about the Pharisees. I'd heard about them all my life, of course, but didn't really have much of an idea how they viewed the world.

The associated definition of legalism was attempting to save oneself by keeping the rules. I was about to begin a journey into a branch of religion that valued a "reform" lifestyle and which had lots of rules to follow. There were rules about what you could and couldn't eat, rules about when to have personal devotion, rules about how to dress (more stringent for the ladies), and rules about what to do with leisure time (what little we were allowed).

After I left that system I retained the belief that they were fundamentally right, and it would take years for me to accept the concept that I had been barking up the wrong spiritual tree. For a long time I believed that you could do all those things and not be a legalist as long as you held that your salvation was based on what Christ did, not on what you did.

But if that's really the case, what does it matter what I do? As my understanding of the Bible grew, I gradually synthesized a new belief system in which the rules were a privilege, not a basis for salvation. But I also began to reach an understanding about what God really wanted for his followers. He wanted to change the basic motivations and goals of their lives; he wanted to change their characters.

As I continued to process the difference between character and behavior I

became more and more convinced that a transformed character would lead to appropriate behavior in all situations, including the ones in which the rules were confusing or downright contradictory. That eventually led me to write a short book on “Character vs. Behavior.”

The book was reviewed, but not published, and I was about to learn a radical new truth that affirmed most of what I wrote, but also added a whole new realm to the concepts I had spelled out. At one point I even added a chapter to the manuscript, but it seemed a contrived addition.

Along with that came a new understanding of what it means to be a legalist. Yes, legalism can involve a focus on behavior modification as a road to salvation. But it can also be a fundamental belief about the nature of the atonement Jesus provided at the close of his earthly life.

During the dark ages, the powerful church derived a fairly steady income from a doctrine which isn't found in the Bible. The doctrine of Purgatory, where humans would endure torment to pay for their sins, allowed the church to extort money from believers by promising to reduce the time a departed loved one would have to spend in Purgatory.

As the Enlightenment dawned and the Protestant Reformation took hold, those seeking to reform religion needed a doctrine to free the people of this extortion. So they developed the doctrine of penal substitution. Yes, they argued, sin had to be punished, but Jesus was punished for our sins on the cross, and if we accept his “payment” we don't have to endure punishment ourselves.

At that point in history this liberated people. But it wasn't any more Biblical than the doctrine it replaced. And it was founded on an essentially legal view of how God dealt with the problem of sin in his universe.

Such a legal approach is understandable in our culture. We make a big deal about the “rule of law.” Certainly the use of a legal framework to define what is socially acceptable has many advantages over the arbitrary and sometimes mercurial dictates of a monarch. It allows people to perform tasks that require long-term planning.

But such laws are still written by humans. Unlike natural laws, such as the law of respiration, which enforce themselves, human laws usually don't have natural consequences for violators. So humans decided to develop undesirable circumstances to impose on those who would break the law. These punishments could range in severity all the way up to death of the transgressor.

All that is, of course, very old, and most people think that's the way God designed life to operate. They would feel very uncomfortable in an environment without the protection of imposed laws.

Enter another human vice, dishonesty. This one cuts both ways. A person who broke the law may lie and say they didn't do it. Conversely, someone may lie and accuse someone of something they didn't do. It wouldn't be appropriate to punish someone for something they didn't do, so a legal system has to include a way for society to determine who's telling the truth.

So we have courts, and those who preside over the courts make judgments about what the truth is. So we call them judges. And when we encounter the term “judgment” in the Bible we tend to link in everything associated with human law courts.

And that is another form of legalism. We see God as the ultimate law-giver and judge. When we violate his law (often defined as the Ten Commandments) a just God is forced to punish the violator, us. And the doctrine of penal substitution has Jesus step in and take that punishment in our place so that we can be saved.

The problem with that approach is that it makes God the problem that must be solved to win our salvation. But God is NOT the problem, he is the solution. The problem is sin. And sin isn't just a violation of God's rules. It is living in a way that is fundamentally out of harmony with God's design for life.

God can't change his law to save us, not because it is some hyper-imperial mandate, but because it would disturb all other life to do so. You can't change the law of respiration to save a drowning person. Instead, you have to restore that person so they are living in harmony with the law of respiration.

So the point of salvation is not to change God. He's perfect and doesn't need to be changed. We are out of harmony with the principles of life, and if we are to be saved, we need to change. And yes, that is the character transformation I spoke of earlier.

Based on this understanding, judgment isn't a case of a magistrate making decisions about whether someone dotted all the legal “I”s and crossed all the legal “T”s. It's merely a diagnosis to see if the character is healthy—in harmony with the design for life prepared by a loving creator.

Based on this new definition of legalism, a lot of people who take a very relaxed view about rules still hold tightly to a very legal definition of atonement and salvation.

When Paul said all the things he did about the inability of the law to save us, he wasn't opening the door to permissiveness. He was demonstrating that no amount of rules could deal with the problem that faces us humans. Unless we are changed from the inside, unless the disease of sin is removed and our souls healed, eternal life is not possible.

The rule keepers have one major problem, which is that their goal is to save themselves. This fundamental self-focus is part of the problem that needs to be solved. Only when self passes out of the focus can true character transformation, true healing, begin. That's why our reliance must be on Jesus. Only when we give up all attempts to save ourselves can Jesus start the work of transforming us from self-centered to others-centered.

Self-surrender. That's a tall order. Maybe that's why Jesus said so many would fail to find the road to life.

May God grant you and me the grace to surrender fully.

Elkanah

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