



Legalism v. Liberty

The word "freedom" has a variety of meanings for a variety of people. To Martha Stewart, it means early release from prison. To an Iraqi citizen, it means democratic rule following the elections in January. To a small businessman it may be defined in purely economic terms. To someone in a formerly communist bloc country it may mean the absence of social and political oppression. But what does "freedom" mean to the Christian? What does it mean to you?

In Galatians 5:13 Paul wrote, *"For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."* Why did God the Father set his saving love on you? Why did God the Son die for you? Why did God the Holy Spirit call you to faith in that sacrifice? Freedom!

For the Christian, freedom means one of three things. There is, first of all, freedom from the condemnation of God's wrath. This is what Paul had in mind in Romans 8:1 when he declared, *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* Second, there is freedom from the compulsion of sin. Romans 6:14 assures us that *"sin will have no dominion" over us since we "are not under law but under grace."* Then, thirdly, there is freedom from the conscience of other people, which is the primary theme of the fourteenth chapter of Romans. It is on the third of these manifestations of Christian freedom that I want to concentrate.

The Threat of Legalism

There are people, professing Christian people, who are determined to bring you under their religious thumb. They are bent on making you a slave of their conscience. They have built a tidy religious box, without biblical justification, and strive to stuff you inside and make you conform to its dimensions. They are legalists, and their tools are guilt, fear, intimidation, and self-righteousness. They proclaim God's unconditional love for you, but insist on certain conditions before including you among the accepted, among the approved elite, among God's favored few.

I'm not talking about people who insist you obey certain laws or moral rules in order to be saved. Such people aren't legalists. They are lost! They are easily identified and rebuffed. I'm talking about Christian legalists whose goal is to enforce conformity among other Christians in accordance with their personal preferences. These are life-style legalists. They threaten to rob you of joy and to squeeze the intimacy out of your relationship with Jesus. They may even lead you to doubt your salvation. They heap condemnation and contempt on your head so that your life is controlled and energized by fear rather than freedom and joy and delight in God.

Rarely would these folk ever admit to any of this. They don't perceive or portray themselves as legalists. If they are reading this they are probably convinced I'm talking about someone else. They'd never introduce themselves: "Hi! My name is Joe/Julie. I'm a legalist and my goal is to steal your joy and keep you in bondage to my religious prejudices. Would you like to go to lunch after church today and let me tell you all the things you're doing wrong?"

I suspect that some of you are either legalists or, more likely, the victims of legalism. You live in fear of doing something that another Christian considers unholy, even though the Bible is silent on the subject. You are terrified of incurring their disapproval, disdain, and ultimate rejection. Worse still, you fear God's rejection for violating religious traditions or cultural norms that have no basis in Scripture but are prized by the legalist. You have been duped into believing that the slightest misstep or mistake will bring down God's disapproval and disgust.

When you are around other Christians, whether in church or a home group or just hanging out, do you feel free? Does your spirit feel relaxed or oppressed? Do you sense their acceptance or condemnation? Do you feel judged, inadequate, inferior, guilty, immature, all because of your perceived failure to conform to what someone else regards as “holy”?

Jesus wants to set you free from such bondage! As Paul said, *“you were called to freedom”!*

Defining Legalism

Legalism has been defined in a number of ways, but here is my attempt. Legalism is the tendency to regard as divine law things which God has neither required nor forbidden in Scripture and the corresponding inclination to look with suspicion on others for their failure or refusal to conform.

So, how do I know if I’m a legalist? Here is a simple test, consisting of five questions.

- 1) Do you place a higher value on church customs than on biblical principles? Many of our so-called “rights” and “wrongs” in church life are the product, not of the Bible, but family background, culture, social and economic factors, geographical locale, and a long-standing institutional commitment to doing things the way they’ve always been done. Once again, as long as the Bible doesn’t prohibit such practices, you may well be free to pursue them. But you are not free to insist that others do so as well.
- 2) Do you elevate to the status of moral law something the Bible does not require? Let me mention just a few examples.

Whereas the Bible explicitly forbids drunkenness, it nowhere requires total abstinence. Make no mistake: total abstinence from alcohol is great. As a Christian you are certainly free to adopt that as a lifestyle. But you are not free to condemn those who choose to drink in moderation. You may discuss with them the wisdom of such a choice and the practical consequences of it, but you cannot condemn them as sub-spiritual or as falling short of God’s best.

The Bible encourages modesty in dress. Both male and female are to be careful not to dress in a way that flaunts their sexuality or is unnecessarily ostentatious and seductive. But we have no right to condemn others for their wearing of colorful clothing or the use of makeup or a particular hairstyle.

The Bible condemns lust in no uncertain terms. But the legalist uses this to condemn as unholy everything from television to the internet to movies (even PG) to mixed swimming. Make no mistake: you may be significantly better off by severely curtailing your use of TV and the internet, and I strongly advise that you be more discerning than ever when it comes to the trash coming out of Hollywood that so often passes for “art”. But these forms of media can also be powerful tools for the expansion and expression of kingdom truths when wisely utilized.

Parents are to raise their kids in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. About that there is no mistake. As a parent, you may believe that all public schools are tools of the devil and cesspools of secular humanism. It is certainly your right to hold that opinion and make your decisions concerning your child’s education accordingly. But you have no biblical right to question the spirituality of those Christian parents who would hold a different view. Whether you educate your children at home or send them to a private school or public school is a matter on which Scripture is silent. Hold your conviction with passion and zeal, but do not seek to enslave the conscience of others who may disagree with you.

- 3) Do you tend to look down your spiritual nose at those who don’t follow God’s will for YOUR life?

Chuck Swindoll tells the story of a missionary family that served in a place where peanut butter was hard to obtain. This family arranged for friends in the U.S. to send them peanut butter so they could enjoy it with their meals. They soon discovered that other missionaries in the same country considered it a mark of spirituality that one abstain from peanut butter. It was their

“cross to bear”! This family didn’t flaunt their enjoyment of peanut butter but they did continue to thank God for it and enjoyed it in the privacy of their own home. But the pressure and condemnation from their fellow missionaries intensified to such a degree that the family eventually returned home, disillusioned and cynical.

Someone might argue that the couple should have yielded and agreed not to eat peanut butter out of deference to the beliefs of their associates and for the sake of the gospel in that country. Perhaps. But to do so would also serve only to reinforce error in the minds of the legalists who insisted that peanut butter was “off limits”. You are not doing anyone a favor by behaving in such a way that you encourage or embolden them in their legalistic ways.

Part of being a Christian is the freedom not to eat peanut butter. But it is not part of being a Christian that you condemn others if they do. You are free to exercise your freedom, but you are not free to insist that others not exercise theirs!

- 4) Are you uncomfortable with the fact that the Bible does not explicitly address every ethical decision or answer every theological question?

Legalists tend to fear ambiguity. The legalist’s favorite colors are black and white. They are uncomfortable with biblical silence and insist on speaking when the Word of God does not. They feel something of a “calling” to fill in the gaps left by Scriptural silence or to make specific and often detailed applications that God, in the Bible, chose not to make.

- 5) Are you more comfortable with rules than with relationships?

I’m not talking about explicit biblical rules. In Psalm 119 we see the proper Christian response to biblical laws and commandments and precepts and rules. We are to rejoice and celebrate in the laws of God and to happily and joyfully obey them. I’m talking about rules of your own making, rules you feel “led” to make as what you perceive to be the only legitimate application of what the Bible does say. God-given rules are good and righteous, but they are designed to enhance and develop Christian relationships, not stifle, crush, and kill them.

Why Would Anyone Want to be a Legalist?

What is the appeal of legalism? Let me mention five things that draw people to embrace legalism.

First, legalism provides us with a sense of security in that it enables us always to know precisely what to do in every conceivable moral dilemma. There is a certain sort of psychological safety in being stiff morally.

Second, legalism nurtures pride. “Look at what I’m willing to forego that others embrace! Others may indulge themselves but I have a discipline and a moral standard they lack. I possess a willpower that really loves God. Therefore, God really loves me” (with the implication that God doesn’t really love those who choose another path, or at least doesn’t love them as much as he loves me!).

Third, it provides an excuse to maintain control. One need never fear the unknown because there is always a rule or law (of my own making, of course) to govern every situation. After all, without rules things will get out control (or so legalists think).

Fourth, there is comfort in conformity. It is always reassuring when other people live like we do, even if there is no explicit biblical warrant for it.

Fifth, some embrace legalism out of a genuine, heart-felt concern for other believers. They are actually motivated by love and compassion, worried that the spiritual welfare of others is at risk. They fear that others will assuredly “fall” if they walk down a certain path, even though that path is nowhere prescribed in Scripture (see especially Romans 14:4).

Conclusion

I have three concluding comments. First, the Christian is not free to do what the Bible forbids. Christian freedom does not entail the right to fornicate or to steal or to lie or to persist in an unforgiving attitude or to do anything else the Scriptures explicitly prohibit. And a person who lovingly points this out to you is not a legalist for having done so!

Second, God does not want your Christian life to be characterized or dominated by fear and guilt and intimidation. He wants you to experience optimum joy, freedom, intimacy, and delight in Him. He wants you to enjoy your freedom and to use it in the service of love for others. This leads directly to the third, and final, conclusion.

Third, there is something more important than the mere exercise of freedom: love. Read Gal. 5:13 again. I strongly urge you to read my lesson on Romans 14 in the Biblical Studies section of the website where I discuss the reasons why at times we should forego an otherwise legitimate Christian liberty for the sake of others.

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