

What is *Legalism*?

(The following is the substance of an address given at an after-church meeting at Loughbrickland Reformed Presbyterian Church on 30th April 2006.)

The term 'legalism' is intended to convey the idea of some misuse of, or undue prominence being given to, the law. It refers to an alleged giving of a wrong place or a disproportionate place to the law. The law in view must be the law of God. It is a negative term; a term used by way of criticism of someone else's views or practice in some respect. Often it is used very unthinkingly as a rather general criticism of what is deemed excessive pignicketiness. If it means a wrong or distorted view of the law of God, in what circumstances should the term be used as a justifiable criticism and condemnation?

1. Sinful Misuses of the term Legalism

It is a sinful and an unjust use of the term, if it is used as an undefined condemnation of someone else's views or practice that we just don't like. We are sinners and to condemn someone's views or practice as legalistic simply because we know that to adopt those views or practices for ourselves would be demanding for us and this is not to our taste to contemplate, and to do that without scriptural footing for our use of the term, is a sinful misuse of the term.

To call someone's position or practice legalistic because we do not wish to be bothered thinking about it or to consider taking on board the restrictions that might be involved if we were to agree with them, and to do so without reference to the word of God, is a sinful slander of another Christian. Do not condemn a viewpoint as legalistic unless you can show it to be unscriptural. We should not use the term 'legalism' as a get-out term to avoid having to consider biblically the demands of another Christian's viewpoint. It is never to be dismissed as legalism if someone is trying to be scriptural; we can never be too scriptural - I hope we all believe that - but sometimes the obvious has to be spelled out. We can be and are too unscriptural but we can never be excessively conformed to the word of God, and because someone claims a scriptural footing for something we have never thought of or we would find inconvenient to adopt, and we are unwilling to examine whether it is scriptural or not, to call it legalism is dishonest.

But then also we should not use the term legalism as a way of making flexible what, biblically, should be inflexible. There are inflexible principles in scripture and sometimes when we want to make them more flexible, more rubbery than scripture allows, in order to justify our doing so we can say that we don't want to be legalistic - that also is an abuse of the term; it is very similar to what we said earlier about someone else's views, but in this case there isn't anyone else involved. We want to compromise what we know to be biblical principles, but because we cannot find a biblical basis to make them as pliable as we want them to be, we say, 'well, we mustn't be legalistic, must we?' - that is an abuse of the term.

In 1 Samuel 13:8-14, the fixed principle was that the Lord has the right to prescribe his own worship; King Saul, when Samuel didn't appear and he was feeling the pressure of the delay due to the Philistine threat, he in effect said, 'Well, we're in a tight spot here, the Philistines are gathering, Samuel hasn't come and whilst yes, it should be Samuel that offers the burnt offering and not me as the king, yet given the situation we are in I'd better do it.' You could imagine Saul saying, 'We mustn't be legalistic!'. I'm sure he didn't quite say that, but it is the kind of situation where such language would be used by many today. 'Does it really matter, after all if the heart is right...?' Yet verse 14 shows that the heart wasn't right or it would have mattered to him as surely as it did matter to the Lord himself. He knew what the divine command was, 'The LORD hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the LORD hath commanded him to be captain over his people because thou hast not kept that which the LORD commanded thee.' (1 Samuel 13:14). In other words Saul was not a man after God's own heart and that's why he did what he did. He should have waited; he should have recognised an inflexible principal revealed by God and not made it flexible when he had no right to do so.

Consistency with scripture is not legalism; offering sacrifice to obey God's law in an awkward situation, when it would be easier to do otherwise would not have been legalism but obedience. Refusing to make God's commands optional is not legalism, and making God's commands optional is not 'spiritual'. In 1 Samuel 15:8,9:13-15 we have another example from the life of Saul. He hadn't kept the commandment of the Lord, he hadn't done what God had said and the notion of avoiding legalism would never have carried any weight with Samuel or, above all, with the Lord.

Attention to detail in itself is not legalism, even when Christ was denouncing real legalism he still does not justify leaving smaller duties undone. In Matthew 23:23, the Lord Jesus says, 'Woe unto you, scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone'. They made important the smaller matters and ignored the weightier, but Christ still doesn't say that the smaller things didn't matter. Rather he said you should have done the lesser things but, although you shouldn't have left these undone, you should have done the bigger things.

If we allow ourselves to waive what we consider small matters in the requirements and commandments of God, how small is small and where are we going to draw this arbitrary line between big and small? We become the arbiters and isn't it just the same as 'ye shall be as gods' (Gen.3:15). As if we were saying, 'alright we'll do as God says but we will decide which part of God's commandments are really important and the others which don't really matter, for after all we don't want to be legalistic do we?' Selective obedience is sin; consistent obedience is not legalism. We may never break the moral law on the pretext of avoiding legalism; this is to make our freedom a cloak for our sin. Never use professed avoidance of legalism as a means of concealing from yourself a desire to avoid obeying God's word in any matter. How much idolatry, unscriptural

worship, profanity, Sabbath-breaking, insubordination, malice, immorality, theft, falsehood or covetousness, will we end up sanctioning under this guise of avoiding legalism? It is not avoiding legalism it is indulging sin that, after all, is what all transgression of the law constitutes by definition (1 John 3:4).

We should never use the term legalism of others or as an excuse for ourselves without knowing that we have solidly scriptural grounds for so doing. Let not then the term legalism be a convenient peg on which to hang our desire for lawlessness. There is such a desire, because we are still sinners and have so much corruption within us. As Christians we are taught of God through the Word, but there is still much corruption within and, when we want to sin, because we know scriptural language and we know the terminology we have our own ways of justifying sin and this is one of them. It is all too handy for us to conceal sin under the slogan of avoiding legalism.

2. The Real Meaning of Legalism

If 'legalism' is a term simply describing misuse of the law of God, how can it be properly used?

Firstly, attempted self-justification by works; the fundamental misuse of the law of God is to use that law, and our attempts to keep it, as the ground of our hope and basis for acceptance with God. 1 Timothy 1:8-11 the apostle Paul condemns this misuse of the law of God. He shows that a lawful use of the law is not as a means of attempted self-justification before God through our efforts to keep it, but rather the first right use of the law to show us we are sinners and our need of the Saviour. He says the law was given 'for the lawless and disobedient' (v.9) to show sin and expose sin. This use of the law is 'according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God' (v.11); it is in line with the gospel that the first lawful use of the law is to show us our need of Christ. This is in harmony with the glorious gospel of the blessed God.

This is not the only use of the moral law, because that law defines sin and believers are to mortify sin through the grace that is in Christ Jesus, they are to put away and depart from iniquity, and the law of God defines what is sinful and what is right. In Col.3 5-7 the same list of practices which are the target of mortification in the Christian's progress in holiness are also the sins which bring the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. One law defines the ground of the unbeliever's condemnation and also defines that holiness of life which is the aim of the believer.

Nevertheless, the first use of the law is to show we are sinners and in need of the Saviour and to attempt to use that law as a means of making us acceptable to God, by our personal attempts to keep it, is to use the law in a manner that is contrary to the gospel and that is an abuse of the law. Pharisee-ism, self-salvation by the works of the law, is a sinful use of the law; it is a rebellion against the gospel of our Lord Jesus. This is the most fundamental form of legalism.

Secondly, adding to God's law by human tradition making our own laws. Christ condemns this abuse of God's law in Matt 15:7-9. To add our own ideas our own traditions and precepts to the law of God is legalism; a misuse of God's law. Such adding to God's law invariably results in subtraction from the law as it did here; the Pharisees used their traditions to opt out of the fifth commandment as the previous verses show. Law-invention involves law-subtraction from the real law of God. The inventions are invariably easier on the flesh (our sinful nature) than what is actually in the law of God.

It may be objected that the Pharisee's added all sorts of minute and burdensome precepts of their own and they weren't easy to keep. They were easier to keep than the real thing, because human precepts, however physically demanding, invariably do not require the mortification of pride, whereas the real word of God does. Their array of additional minutiae was still easier than the real demands of the law of God. Such addition to the law of God of human tradition is to claim the status for divine law for that which is not divine law and that is an abuse of the law of God; it is putting something forward under the guise of law that is not the law of God. It involves an attempt to usurp the place of God as the one true lawgiver.

Thirdly, emphasising the external but ignoring the internal. God looks on the heart; the Pharisee's were only concerned with the outward. Of course if the heart is right we will want the outward to be right; never use the idea that God looks on the heart as an excuse for not doing what is right outwardly. Professed inner devotion to the Lord is never a valid excuse for outward disobedience and the attempt to make it so is hypocrisy. The heart is not right if you deliberately ignore scripture; how can the heart be right if you outwardly defy the word of God? If the heart is right there will be a desire to comply with the outward requirements of the word of God. But it is possible to have the outward in place but be cold in heart towards God and the motive of God's glory can be lacking, or else it can be in a very low frame and lower motives can predominate or even a sense of drudgery can be involved. When that happens it is never the answer to knock the outward out of line with the word of God, but to seek grace to get the heart and inward motive right until we are like the psalmist in Psalm 119:20, 'My soul breaketh for the longing that it hath unto thy judgments at all times'. So if we find ourselves outwardly conforming to God's law but with a cold and sluggish heart, what needs attention is not the outward that is right but the inward that is wrong.

This emphasis on the external can also mean that sinful desires are not regarded as sin, provided the sinful outward action is avoided. Sins such as heart-idolatry, covetousness, malicious hatred and sexual lust can be ignored. Christ indicates the vast scope of God's law even upon the thoughts of the heart in Matt. 5:21-30.

There is generally a connection between these various forms of legalism. These abuses of the law of God often exist in one person. We referred earlier to Matthew 23:23. There was something wrong with these Pharisees with their great concern with the minor matters of the law as well as their own additions on the one hand and their indifference about the big real things of God's law on the other; their problem was very fundamental

indeed in that this indicated that they were not even regenerate at all. A program of works salvation that required no heart change or dependence on a crucified Saviour for righteousness, and did not produce that true desire for holiness which saving faith does produce, was what was wrong with these Pharisees.

They desired an alternative, convenient, man-made definition of holiness because they didn't want Christ's righteousness imputed to them and they did not have the beginning of that imparted righteousness which Christ works in his true people. They wanted a form of divine law of their own making, one that they could manage, one that concentrated on detail but didn't require any heart change because they didn't have a changed heart, and so they wanted to mangle and distort God's law in a manner that made them think they could keep it.

Sometimes, however, a preoccupation with detail while the big things are being neglected is an indication of a spiritual problem, but one not quite as drastic as that of the Pharisees. When relish for true and thorough holiness has declined, we can fasten on a few external things on which we haven't compromised to quieten our consciences and to try and convince ourselves that we are not really backslidden at all. We need to watch for this. We tell ourselves that we can't be so spiritually stagnant when we maintain a firm line on certain things. We can have our hearts in a largely drifted, backslid, stagnated condition with no real zeal for God and his word and the ways of the Lord and yet still be very consistent on certain external things; and the danger is that we use that to salve our consciences to tell ourselves that we are actually getting along quite well when we are not.

3. Avoiding legalism

How do we avoid legalism? We never avoid it by knowingly departing from the word of God in any degree. Remember, every transgression of the law of God is sin in thought word and action. Concerning matters that we call small sins, if we are Christians, we believe Christ bore the wrath of God for those 'small' sins. We call them small but they still deserve damnation. The Westminster Confession of Faith on Repentance unto life 'As there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent' (15:4). This is a wonderful statement - but just taking the first part, there is no sin so small but that it deserves damnation, every sin is damnable and so we never ever should seek to avoid legalism by indulging sin, even sins that we like to call small. Christ bore the wrath of God for all his people's sins - the big and the not so big. Outward sloppiness of practice will never produce inner godliness; if the problem is internal don't mess up what is external and right, put right what's inside but wrong.

If we are accused of legalism what should we do, what should we think in our own hearts and minds? If someone says a particular practice of ours is legalistic we should ask, why do I do this? Is it scriptural? If it is, stick to it never mind what they say. But you may ask, they are wrong to say the practice is legalistic but is my attitude legalistic, have I

become proud in my motive? If we have indeed become proud of some scriptural practice, if the practice is scriptural then stick with it, but seek the grace of God in Christ to mortify the pride. Then we can ask, am I lopsided, am I sinning bigger sins and ignoring bigger sins in my life and yet insisting on these smaller things? If the smaller things are scriptural still insist on them but address the bigger sins and seek the grace of God to bring other parts of our lives into line with scripture; two wrongs don't make a right; sinning 'little' sins will not help us overcome big sins. Satan seeks to get one sin to lead to another till we just give up the Christian battle and indulge sin without much restraint at all.

Also, we must be aware of our temperamental disposition. Some people by temperament are careless and some people are natural sticklers for detail. If we belong to the latter category, beware of the danger of seeing a principal where Scripture doesn't actually put one, or else engrossment with small things at the expense of bigger things. Some people's temperament inclines them to engrossment with detail which in itself is not wrong, but to a somewhat tunnel vision approach where they are sticklers for certain things but miss other important deficiencies. We need to know ourselves and know how sin more easily works in our particular case, because although we are all sinners we vary as to those sins that we are more easily drawn into.

Seek the help of God not to give up any Scriptural practice, but to have an overall balanced picture of the Christian life and what the law of God requires, that our lives should not only be right in certain areas of conduct, but the whole of our lives manifest the beauty of the Lord upon us. Some people are preoccupied with details - right details - but their lives are not beautiful, they are not kind or generous, they are not compassionate, which doesn't commend these other matters if basic Christian qualities are at such low ebb. We must make sure we are aiming at an overall godliness that is biblically beautiful.

Above all we must think much upon Christ and our absolute dependence upon him. The strict Covenanters in Scotland that we often like to think about, how were they so strict and unbending in their principles? It wasn't because they were legalists otherwise they would have crumbled at the first breeze of persecution. Real legalists generally easily compromise, because legalism, in the true sense of the word, doesn't give people guts, self-righteousness has no strength in it.

The Covenanters, however, sought to keep up communion with Christ; they had great views in their hearts of Christ's glory and of his grace and loveliness as you can readily tell that from their sermons. Yes, they thundered against the house of Stuart and the indulgences and the ministers who were compromising, and rightly so, but read of their preaching of Christ and his loveliness and beauty and glory and you will soon know these men were not legalists in the proper sense of the word. They wanted to honour Christ in all things that he might have the pre-eminence; he has the pre-eminence but they wanted it acknowledged in the lives of the individual, in the home, in the church and in the state. They were constrained by their great thoughts of Christ to be sticklers for everything that pertained to the honour of the Redeemer, and that's why they were so unbending in their

principles. It is only grace that makes uncompromising Christians, the grace of God in them enabling them to behold the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ who for their sakes became poor though he was rich.

The man who is proud of his strictness will soon prove unstable under pressure; the man who blows and brags about how consistent he is, is the man who will end up compromising. If our attempted consistency makes us feel that we are not really sinners after all and we don't feel our dependence upon Christ's grace, we are in real trouble. Except we abide in the vine we can do nothing; the man who talks about his consistency is the man who is in a precarious position, but the man who just seeks to be consistent and 'straight in the way' because he can say from the heart, 'the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me, draw me and we will run after thee', that's the man who will stand. Consistent Christians don't brag about their consistency, they make their boast in the Lord and their desire is to honour him. Amen.