

Avoiding Legalism

Legalism is defined by Webster's Collegiate Dictionary as "A too strict or literal interpretation of or adherence to a law or code." We should note that is a secular definition. Another definition of legalism in view of the Holy Scriptures is, "applying human restrictions to God's principles."

Legalism described in Scripture

While the term "Legalism" is not found in the Scriptures, the Scriptures do describe its characteristics better than either definition can. We need to consider what the Lord had to say concerning the Pharisees and their misrepresentations of God's principles. Let's carefully ponder the following points.

Legalism is a persistent challenge to the church.

(Galatians 5:1) "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."

Legalism sacrifices basic Biblical principles in the name of better serving the Lord.

(Galatians 5:2-4) "Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law...ye are fallen from grace." Also, Matthew 23.

Legalism generates an opposite reaction of permissiveness. These two extremes are NOT the only choices.

(Galatians 5:13) "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh but by love serve one another."

Legalism fosters strife in place of charity.

(Galatians 5:14-15) "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another."

Legalism confuses man-made principles with God's laws.

(Mark 2:23-24) "And it came to pass, that he went through the corn fields on the Sabbath day; and his disciples began, as they went, to pluck the ears of corn. And the Pharisees said unto him, Behold, why do they on the Sabbath day that which is not lawful?"

Legalism values outward details over the condition of a person's heart.

(Mark 2:25-26) "And he said unto them, Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was an hungered, he, and they that were with him? How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the showbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to them which were with him?"

(Isaiah 29:13) "Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men."

(Psalms 51:16-17) “For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

(Romans 14:17) “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.”

Legalism blinds people to the clear working of the Lord.

(Luke 13:14) “And the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath day, and said unto the people, There are six days in which men ought to work: in them therefore come and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day”

(John 5:10-11) “The Jews therefore said unto him that was cured, it is the Sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed. He answered them, He that made me whole, the same said unto me, take up thy bed and walk.”

Legalism fosters hypocrisy.

(Luke 13:15) “The Lord then answered him and said, Thou hypocrite, doth not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering?”

Legalism is sometimes supported by well-meaning believers.

(Acts 15:5) “But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees, which believed, saying, that it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the Law of Moses.”

Legalism substitutes rituals for the righteousness of God.

(Romans 10:2-4) “For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.”

Legalism creates a grossly distorted view of a person’s standing with God, as well as that of others.

(Isaiah 65:5) “Which say, Stand by thyself, come not near me; for I am holier than thou. These are a smoke in my nose, a fire that burneth all the day.”

(James 1:26) “If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain.”

Legalism values men’s high opinions rather than God’s.

(Matthew 6:5) “And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward.”

Legalism makes life difficult for others while excusing one’s own self.

(Matthew 23:4) “For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.”

Avoiding legalism

The Scriptures do more than describe the characteristics of legalism. They also teach us how we can avoid it. Together, we can walk in the light of the Word, on a pathway that avoids the dangers of legalistic thinking

Know what the scriptures teach about doctrine and principles for living.

(II Timothy 2:15) “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Recognize the danger of Legalism and hold fast to what the Scriptures actually say.

(Galatians 5:1) “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.”

Discern between areas that are absolute, such as doctrine, and areas that are not. Recognize there may be more than one acceptable way to apply Biblical principles to a given situation. Show flexibility with discernment in these areas.

(Hebrews 6:1-2) “Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.”

(I Thessalonians 5:21) “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.”

(II Thessalonians 2:15) “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.”

Walk in the spirit.

(Galatians 5:16) “This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.”

(Romans 8:4) “That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.”

Seek humility; repent where appropriate.

(Psalms 51:17) “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

Replace compulsory service (“because I have to”) with devotional service (“because I love the Lord”).

(I John 5:1-3) “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.”

Because the Spirit speaks with a single voice to all who will hear, seek confirmation of decisions and practices with others who are Spirit-led.

(II Peter 1:20-21) “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”

Teach others by example.

(I Timothy 4:16) “Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt save both thyself, and them that hear thee.”

Appoint faithful Brothers to also teach sound doctrine.

(II Timothy 2:2) “And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.”

Truth for our Time is prepared by the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarean) Communications Committee. Comments or questions can be directed to: ACCNcommunications@gmail.com