

# Doctrinal Brief: What Is Legalism?

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In 1964 U. S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart was explaining whether something was obscene. He is remembered for his response. After stating that "hard-core pornography was hard to define," he added, "I know it when I see it."<sup>1</sup> In some ways this statement also applies to legalism. The word is often used in our midst. We warn against it. We talk about the dangers of it. We try to avoid it. But when asked to explain it, we end up echoing the words of Stewart. "Legalism is hard to define, but I know it when I see it."

Even though it may be difficult to come up with a concise definition of this word, let's consider some of the ways it is used. The term "legalism" is used in three basic ways.

- The first usage pertains to the area of justification. It is a synonym for work-righteousness. When we attempt or encourage salvation by works, we are guilty of legalism.
- The second way we use the term legalism pertains to sanctification. When we seek to motivate a Christian to do good works with the law rather than the gospel, we are guilty of legalism.
- Finally, legalism can also refer to an unchristian, judgmental attitude. We have our own personal view of what a Christian should be like, and because a fellow Christian does not measure up to this standard, we look down on him or her.

There is sometimes a connection between the second and third usage of this word, but not always. When we use the term "legalism" in our circles, we are more often talking about the second usage—a confusion of law and gospel in the Christian's life of sanctification. Therefore this article will look primarily at this second usage of the term "legalism."

Because as Christians we are saint and sinner, old man and new man, flesh and spirit, we need both the law and the gospel. In the history of the Lutheran church, some have argued that the Christian no longer needs the law, yet Scripture (Rom 7; 1 Cor 9:27) as the *norma normans* and the Formula of Concord (Art. VI) as a *norma normata* clearly teach that the Christian needs the law. But the way we use the law and the gospel to motivate the Christian to good works will determine whether we have fallen into legalism. Simply speaking, legalism is a confusion of law and gospel. It is a mindset that seeks to move a Christian to good works pleasing to God through the law rather than the gospel. This law could be God's law, or a human law, policy, or practice. It could also be the gospel turned into a law.<sup>2</sup>

This does not mean that the law has no place in the Christian's life of sanctification. But as far as good works are concerned, the law can only keep the sinful nature in check. We use the law to beat down the Old Adam (1 Cor 9:27), because "like a stubborn, recalcitrant donkey ... [he] needs to be forced into obedience to Christ not only through the law's teaching, admonition, compulsion, and threat but also often with the cudgel of punishments."<sup>3</sup> It is important to remember that applying the law to the sinful nature is not legalism. That is a correct use of the law and an important one at that. Like the apostle Paul, we use God's law to "beat our body and make it our slave" (1 Cor 9:27). But as we do this we need to understand that no good works will result from merely applying the law to the sinful nature. The person may end up doing what the law requires, but he or she will not be doing it with the right motive. "Without faith it is impossible to please God" and the sinful nature will remain an unbeliever to his dying day. He cannot be converted, only killed. He cannot be motivated to God-pleasing works, he

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<sup>1</sup> *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184, 197 (1964).

<sup>2</sup> For an example of turning the gospel into a law, consider the following statement: "The next time you are tempted to sin, remember all that Jesus did for you. The very least you can do for him is obey his commandments."

<sup>3</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, editors, *The Book of Concord*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 591. (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Art VI, paragraph 21)

can only be forced, driven, beaten, and dragged down the road of submission. Because of the sinful nature, the Christian needs the law as a curb.

On the other hand, the new man delights in the law of the Lord. He wants to do what God asks. Through the gospel, he is motivated to live a God-pleasing life. Compelled by his love for Christ, he is more than willing to walk in the good works which Christ prepares for him.<sup>4</sup>

Legalism confuses the law and the gospel. It uses the law to motivate<sup>5</sup> the Christian to good works. It sees obedience to God's laws as the goal and the law and punishments as the way to force people into compliance.

But don't we use the threat of punishment, often called negative reinforcement or behavior modification, to encourage godly living? There is no doubt that we do, and if used properly, this is not a confusion of law and gospel. Such threats curb the sinful nature. However, legalism occurs when we stop there. If we are only concerned about getting a Christian to act in a certain way and use the law to accomplish this goal, then we are being legalistic. Properly applying law and gospel means we apply the threats and punishments of the law to the sinful nature, but it also means that we encourage the new man to good deeds through the gospel. Our goal in this case is not merely outward action but inward love. It is not only a life of compliance to God's law that we seek but a life lived in faith to the glory of God.

We have addressed the use of negative reinforcement and punishment, but what about positive reinforcement? Where does that fit into this discussion of law and gospel and the Christian's life of sanctification? It is true that God often gives us temporal blessings when we keep his laws. The apostle Paul called the command to honor your father and mother "the first commandment with a promise" (Eph 6:2). Through the prophet Malachi the Lord challenged his people to "bring the whole tithe into the storehouse." He then held out the promise, "Test me ... and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit" (Malachi 3:10,11). Jesus stated, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into the lap" (Luke 6:38). Paul added, "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (2 Cor 9:6). While the Lord does hold out temporal blessings, whether physical or spiritual, as an incentive for the Christian, they do not stand alone. They are never set forth as something that contributes to our eternal life. Nor do they stand alone as the sole motivator. The Christian, who wants to do good works out of love for Christ, will see such blessings as more evidence of a gracious and loving God. This God will stop at nothing in blessing his children. These blessings are awards of grace, not rewards of merit.

Now that we have spent some time sorting out the definition of legalism, what are some areas where we need to be alert lest we fall prey to a legalistic mindset? Allow me to share a few areas where it is important to be on guard against legalism.<sup>6</sup>

The first challenge would involve how we view Christians outside our church fellowship. For a Christian who values the truth of God's Word and recognizes that false doctrine can only lead away from Christ, balancing the doctrine of Christian fellowship and church fellowship will never be easy.

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<sup>4</sup> When it comes to good works, a Christian is not only eager to "talk the talk" but also "walk the walk." Paul brings this out in Ephesians 2:10 where he says that we are created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance so that we may walk in them.

<sup>5</sup> Usually in our circles we use the term "motivate" in a positive sense of "moving someone to do good works pleasing to God." This usage is somewhat more restrictive than how the word is used in common English. There it has the broader meaning of using force or influence to move someone to a course of action. This popular definition would include using the law to drive the sinful nature into action. It is important to remember that in our explanation of biblical truth, we are often using this word in a sense that is narrower than in our contemporary culture.

<sup>6</sup> These are also some of the concerns that J. P. Koehler addressed in his paper, "Legalism among Us." For a more detailed exposition, see *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol 2, p 229-282. This paper can also be accessed on the WLS website essay file.

How do we properly rejoice in the fact that a person trusts in Christ as his Savior, even though we cannot practice church fellowship with that person? The danger is that we allow the doctrine of church fellowship to force the doctrine of Christian fellowship out of the picture. The danger is that we become more concerned about right doctrine rather than about Christian faith. When this happens, we are falling into a legalistic mindset.<sup>7</sup>

A second challenging area would be in the way we apply the ministry of the keys in Christian admonition.<sup>8</sup> It can either be done in a legalistic manner or in an evangelical manner. If our goal is right forms and procedures then we can easily view Matthew 18:15-18 as the prescribed formula, the four procedural steps we must apply to an impenitent brother or sister. In such an approach our main concern is to "do church discipline right" rather than to win over a sinning brother or sister. That's legalism. An evangelical ministry recognizes that the goal of Christian admonition is repentance and Jesus' words in Matthew 18 demonstrate the great lengths to which we will go to lead a sinning brother or sister to repentance. Once again we see that the difference between a legalistic ministry and an evangelical ministry has to do with our mindset. What is our objective? And are we using the proper truth (law or gospel) to reach that goal?

Before we close this brief look at legalism, let's not forget that just as legalism is dangerous to souls, so is its opposite. If we are so ready to rejoice in Christian fellowship with those who profess Christ that we push aside the doctrine of church fellowship in the process, we are not applying law and gospel properly. If we shy away from confronting sinners with the law because we are afraid we will drive them away from the church, we are also confusing law and gospel. There is no doubt that God's Word is an offense to the unbeliever. However, when we apply the law and the gospel properly in our use of the keys, our goal will be to lead people to repentance and faith in Christ. Failing to do so is not an evangelical ministry, but unfaithfulness to the means of grace. However, when we are faithful in using the law and gospel, we can find comfort in the promise that it will "accomplish what God desires and achieve the purpose for which he sent it" (Is 55:11). That purpose is to bring sinners to trust in Christ and to encourage them to live their lives to his glory.

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<sup>7</sup> J. P. Koehler speaks about this point on page 247ff in *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. 2.

<sup>8</sup> J. P. Koehler addresses the matter of Christian admonition on page 261ff in *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. 2.