

# Understanding Legalism

Sermon by Andy Sochor

Text: Matthew 15:1-9

The term “legalism” has a strong negative connotation for many. It is not found in the Bible, but it has been coined to describe a certain approach to the Bible. Legalism is associated with the idea of strictness, narrow-mindedness, and being judgmental. Yet there is more to legalism than the popular concept.

## What Is Legalism?

- Legalism is a focus on LAW as a means of justification – yet we are justified by faith (Romans 5:1); all have sinned (Romans 3:23), so we need God’s grace and mercy to be saved (Ephesians 2:4-5)
- A common misconception is that we are justified by faith ALONE – but this is not the case (James 2:24); the faith that justifies us is an OBEDIENT faith (Romans 1:5; James 2:26)
- But the legalist ignores the importance of FAITH and focuses exclusively on LAW – yet this is not just about law-keeping; it also involves manipulating the law in an attempt to justify oneself

## How Legalism Is Manifested

- Obedience by rote rather than from the heart (Isaiah 29:13) – Jesus cited this when He condemned the Pharisees for worshipping God “in vain” (Matthew 15:8-9); if the things we do in service to God are nothing more than items to check off just so we can say we’ve done them, we’ve fallen into the trap of legalism
- Seeking to do the minimum to be saved (Luke 18:18-22) – Jesus did not give a minimum requirement; He requires a complete, lifelong commitment (Luke 9:23; Romans 12:1); if we try to determine the least we can do and still please God, that is a form of legalism
- Looking for loopholes to justify one’s behavior (Matthew 15:4-6) – these are used as an excuse not to obey God’s law (“situation ethics”); Paul was falsely accused of believing this (Romans 3:8); if we look for ways to justify our failure to follow God’s instructions while still claiming to follow His law, we are guilty of legalism
- Assuming the place of God in judging others (Matthew 23:2; cf. 15:2) – no one has a right to judge others in this way (Colossians 2:16); God will hold us accountable if we do this (Romans 14:1, 10); if we condemn others for not conforming to our opinions, we have become legalists
- Striving to carefully follow God’s law is NOT legalism – we must do this (Titus 3:8; Colossians 3:17; Matthew 28:20); instead, a legalist will be careful to give an APPEARANCE of engaging in good deeds while (1) doing the least he can, (2) not obeying from the heart, (3) finding ways to justify his preferred sin, and (4)

condemning those who do not live up to the human standard he created or adopted for himself

## **Conclusion**

- Legalism is typically associated with strictness and narrow-mindedness – but the same mentality leads one to justify his own sins, shortcomings, and unwise decisions
- We must not seek to be justified by law – either by perfect law-keeping or by doing “the minimum”
- Instead, we must recognize that we are justified by faith, grow in the Lord, become more like Christ, and bear fruit in our service to God