

# What Is “Legalism”?

Dub McClish

Is obedience to Christ optional or unnecessary? Are belief in and “love” of Christ the only things required of sinners to be saved? Many would have it so and thus teach. To them, the New Testament consists only of Divine “love letters,” bereft of any authoritative or “legal” character. The New Testament, with its incomparable glad tidings of salvation, indeed reveals the incomparable love of God and His son for sinful man (John 3:16). That the New Testament is God’s “love story” is undeniable, but this fact does not preclude its also being God’s law for all men, for all time, since Calvary.

Paul wrote of “the law of Christ” and even identified one of its precepts (Gal. 6:1–2; cf. Rom. 8:2; 1 Cor. 9:21; Jam. 1:25; 2:12). Besides these explicit statements, other statements and principles imply that (1) the New Testament is God’s law for the Christian Age and (2) all men are amenable to it (e.g., Mat. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16).

Those unwilling to honor or even admit the existence of Divine law (i.e., theological liberals) often hurl the term *legalist* at those who emphasize obedience to New Testament commands. *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines *legalism* as “a strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code.” Webster notwithstanding, is it possible to practice “excessive conformity” to Divine law? “Strict, literal...conformity” to His will is what the Lord requires of us (Mat. 7:21–23; John 14:15; Heb. 5:9; et al.).

Liberals actually pay those who emphasize obedience a compliment by calling them “legalists.” First, *legalism* implies belief in the existence of law, in this case, the New Testament – the Divine law under which men live and by which all will be finally judged (John 12:48). Second, it implies strict adherence to that law.

Perhaps what the accusers hope to do by the *legalist* label is to identify its recipients as modern scribes and Pharisees. Jesus scathingly rebuked them on more than one occasion, but notably, never for “strict conformity” to God’s law. Rather, He chided them for elevating human opinion, precept, and tradition to the level of Divine law (Mat. 15:3, 6–9). Further, He condemned them for emphasizing parts of God’s law while rejecting and/or neglecting other parts of it (23:23). In both cases, **they became the actual “legalists,”** making and demanding adherence to their own laws. Those who thus behave today deserve to be called “legalists” in the worst sense. As did the Christ, so should we condemn and expose them.

[**Note:** I wrote this article for and it appeared in the *Denton Record-Chronicle*, Denton, TX, March 26, 2010].

**Attribution:** From *thescripturecache.com*; Dub McClish, owner and administrator