

What Is a “Legalist”?

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Many professed believers chafe at the restraints of Divine Law, as set forth in the New Testament. Those who thus pride themselves on being “broadminded” (i.e., “liberal”) often hurl *legalist* at those who emphasize the necessity of obedience to God’s Word. The notorious scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ time are commonly depicted as “legalists.” If their behavior constitutes legalism, we should be quick to avoid it and even expose and rebuke it, as He so often did.

But just what is legalism? This term is not in the Bible, but *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* defines it as “strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code.” It seems fair to question the possibility of an “excessive conformity under consideration. How can one “excessively” obey Holy Writ? Is not “strict, literal conformity” exactly what the Lord Jesus requires of us if we would be saved? Consider a mere sampling of the plethora of passages that so indicate:

- “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mat. 7:21). Did Jesus mean some, much, most, or all of His Father’s will?
- “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). Does Jesus allow us to cast aside His words with which we disagree, or does He expect “strict conformity” to all of them?
- Jesus will render “vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 The. 1:8). May we pick and choose which parts of the Gospel to obey, or must we obey all of it to escape the Lord’s avenging Judgment against sin and sinners?
- “And having been made perfect, he became unto all them that obey him the author of eternal salvation” (Heb. 5:9). May men merely “obey” Jesus casually or partially and still be saved?” Is such an approach “obedience” at all?

While Jesus often rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy, when did He ever rebuke them for their “strict, literal, or excessive conformity to God’s law”? Rather, He rebuked them for **failing** and/or **refusing** to adhere to it. They elevated their own opinions and traditions to the level of Divine precept, thereby violating and voiding it (Mat. 15:3, 6–9). They chose which parts of God’s law they would keep and which they would ignore (Mat. 23:23).

Liberals, not legalists, are the modern scribes and Pharisees, adhering only to those parts of God’s will that please them.

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