Defining “Legalism”

(by David McClister)

One of the more interesting issues in modern biblical scholarship is the attempt to attain a better understanding of the Jews of the first century, the Jews with whom Jesus and Paul dealt. In spite of the fact that these Jews are mentioned often in the New Testament, the fact is that we just do not know all that much about them.

This is particularly true about the Jewish group that is most prominent in the New Testament, the Pharisees. They themselves left no historical documents which explain or describe how they understood their religion. It is true that their “descendants” (after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD) left lots of documents behind (which eventually became the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the Talmud), but very little of those documents describe the beliefs and practices of the Jews who lived in the first century. In fact, the pedagogical descendants of the Pharisees did not even call themselves Pharisees.

In spite of this shortage of actual historical documents, it has long been assumed that the Pharisees were legalists. But there are two very important questions that go along with this. First, just exactly how do we know that the Pharisees were legalists? [We will leave this matter alone for now; discussing it would take us far from the point I am wishing to make.] The second question is even more important: just what is legalism in the first place? This question turns out to be difficult to answer.

Legalism seems to be like a poem—no one can seem to define it, but everyone thinks they know it when they see it. However, it may surprise you to know that the English word “legalism” itself was not coined until 1645. Even more importantly, there is no Hebrew or Greek word in the Bible that means “legalism.” This latter fact is seldom appreciated. In all of the debates that Paul had with Judaizing teachers, in all the responses he had to their teachings, not once did he ever call them “legalists.” Why not? Because of the simple reason that every Jew—including Jesus, Paul, the Pharisees, and the Judaizers—believed that a person’s works, his deeds, his obedience to God, was without doubt part of a right relationship with God. Within Judaism, that was never at issue. No Jew in that day and age debated whether or not “works” were part of being right with God. Everyone agreed that they were.

It was only after Martin Luther came up with his doctrine of “faith only” (which he, mistakenly, attributed to the apostle Paul) that the modern idea of “legalism” was born. Ever since that time, it has been common to refer to people who emphasize obedience to God in deeds (works) which are demanded by God’s word as “legalists.” But, as I pointed out above, in the days of Jesus and the apostles, whether or not people should actually obey God with deeds of righteousness was never an issue. One of the implications of this fact is that it is not accurate (it is, specifically, anachronistic) to describe Paul’s debate with the Judaizers as a debate over legalism. It simply was not part of the problem. They didn’t even have a word for it!

In spite of the non-biblical foundation of the term, the word “legalist” is still thrown around quite liberally in religious discussions. Protestant evangelicals routinely refer to Roman legalism nunCatholics as legalists. Liberal evangelicals routinely refer to conservative evangelicals as legalists. Some folks in denominational churches have called members of the Lord’s church “legalists,” and even within our fellowship I have heard some Christians refer to other Christians as legalists. In each of these scenarios, the term “legalist” has been applied simply because someone was emphasizing that we ought to be doing what God says we should do, to the chagrin of someone else.

Someone might say that legalism is the idea that a person can be right with God simply on the basis of obeying God’s “rules.” Usually, this is said in some kind of context where faith is being presented as the only way to be right with God in the gospel. The legalist, therefore, is supposedly the person who believes that faith (“only”; defined as a mental activity) is not enough to save a person, but that such a person must also do certain things in order to be right with God. However, note this conversation: ***“They*** [in this context, Jews] ***said to Him, ‘What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent’”*** ([**John 6:28–29**](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/John%206.28%E2%80%9329)). Unless I have seriously misunderstood this passage, Jesus said that having faith is doing what God requires (“working the works of God”). Faith is, if you will, one of God’s “rules.” So is the person who believes in God being a legalist for doing so? I hardly think that’s what people who use the term “legalist” would say.

So what is legalism? Is legalism a matter of being “too strict” about God’s demands? If so, where in the Bible is the list of things about which we should be strict and the things we can be lax about? Who decides when someone is being too strict? Or is legalism a failure to talk enough about the internal qualities a Christian must have, and talking too much about external obedience? If so, where in the Bible is the passage that tells me how much emphasis on external good deeds is too much? How can I measure when I have not emphasized the internal requirements of God “enough”? Am I a legalist simply because I don’t say it to another’s satisfaction? The fact is that both a right heart and good deeds are required before God. ***“I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds”*** ([**Jeremiah 17:10**](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Jer%2017.10)).

Or, is legalism the idea that “external” works, by themselves, will earn a person enough merit to get to heaven? I have to admit, I have never (in the thousands of pages of theological literature I have read in my lifetime) seen it defined that way, and I don’t believe I have ever met anyone who actually believes that. If no one defines it this way and no one believes it when stated that way, then the term “legalist” is nothing other than a straw-man, a caricature that has no correspondence to a real person or an actual doctrine. One modern scholar has put it this way: “The term only has meaning within the context of a prior decision as to the relationship between faith and human response. … In Christian theology, the meaning of legalism varies with the soteriology of the individual user and his or her tradition” (K. Yinger, “Defining Legalism” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 46 (2008) 91–108; at 96–97). Let’s put that into common English: the term “legalism” is so imprecise that it means nothing. It means whatever the person who is using the term thinks it means, or wants it to mean. But that’s not how communication is accomplished. We communicate when we both use words that we understand in the same way. When someone uses a word (like “legalism”) in a way that they alone define, then they are not actually communicating anything.

Very often, I suspect that the charge of legalism, when it is hurled at us by denominational folks, simply means “you think that a person has to do something to be right with God, something more than just believing in Jesus.” In other words, “legalism” often means that I do not believe in the denominational doctrine of “faith only.” Even when Christians accuse each other of being legalists, the term turns out to be empty. Christians are sometimes accused (by other Christians) of legalism who are doing nothing other than being conscientious about obedience, just more so than the person who charges them with legalism. So the charge of legalism thus simply means “you are paying more attention to that particular aspect of obedience than I do.”

To put it plainly, when someone says “you’re a legalist,” all it really means is “you do not conform to **my** idea of how Christianity saves us.” I suppose, then, that I’m a legalist. Whatever that means.