

SERMON 1

Challenges for Discussing Legalism

Legalism is a deep and difficult topic, so before diving into its details, I would like to use this first sermon to give you some perspective for this study. In today's sermon, I want to do three things. First, I want to explain some of the dangers of legalism and address why we should even bother with an in-depth study of this topic. Secondly, I want to explain what makes this topic so difficult that it requires a series of fifteen sermons. And lastly, I will give you a brief outline for this series so that you can see the direction I plan to take and the process I will use to help us study and understand legalism.

Before getting too far into this sermon, I want to state upfront my twin passions for this whole series. As I have studied legalism and all that it entails, I have come to see two great needs. Not only are they both very important, but they both seem neglected, in my opinion.

The first great need is for all Christians to examine themselves for legalistic tendencies. Often, we use the word legalism as an accusation against groups or individuals that we dislike. However, many Christians fail to ask if legalism has any grip on their own lives. I would like to see that change. This first need is primarily a matter of introspection. Instead of chiefly using legalism as an accusation, all Christians would benefit from thinking seriously about questions like: What is legalism? Are we guilty of it ourselves? What can we do to prevent it?

The second great need is to use the accusation of legalism more sparingly. As the first need was a matter of introspection, this need concerns our conduct toward other Christians. The more I have studied legalism, the more I have come to consider

it a matter of the utmost seriousness, and therefore a heavy accusation. To me, the accusation of legalism is just as serious as the accusation of idolatry, blasphemy, or unbelief. However, though legalism is a serious accusation, many Christians have no qualms about calling numerous people legalistic. I think that is a flip-pant attitude. I want to persuade and encourage you to exercise greater restraint. I want you to accuse others of legalism only after you have tried as hard as possible to exonerate them of that charge, to maintain that they are innocent until proven guilty.

I will be reminding you of these twin passions and referring back to them often throughout the course of this series.

THE DANGERS OF LEGALISM

Some of you may be asking, “Why should we even bother with this series?” I believe it is important because legalism is such a danger for Christians.

My thoughts on the dangers of legalism begin with my own temperament. To some degree, I have explored the issue of legalism out of a sense of self-preservation: I wanted to spend time examining my walk with God to make sure that it is what it should be. My personality is such that I care greatly about things such as “standard procedure” and doing things “by the book.” If there is no book, I will write the book. I know that because I have actually written the manuals for how to do my job at the last two jobs I have held. The fact is, I find it difficult to do anything without first consulting some form of rule. In the absence of rules, I tend to devise my own and then consistently follow them to the letter. The positive side of this – if I may say so – is that it tends toward consistency, discipline, and decision-making which is free of emotional baggage. The negative side of this personality trait, however, is that it breeds a kind of slavishness along with a form of undue guilt. Even when I am the one who has created the rules, I still find myself unable to break them, and I can only do so with some measure of regret. For a Christian who has a temperament like mine, this lifestyle becomes even more dangerous. Such a rule-based way of living tends toward

legalism, for legalism's base is the law. So, out of a sense of self-preservation, I have explored the topic of legalism. If I myself cannot properly identify legalism, then I am unable to guard myself against it.

With all that being said about my own personality, legalism can be a danger for Christians of any temperament. You do not have to be a by-the-book kind of person to be in danger of it. In Titus 2:11-14, we read:

¹¹For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹²training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴who gave himself for us to redeem for His own possession a people who are zealous for good works.

We see in this passage that anyone who encounters God's grace automatically inclines toward godly zeal. Because of this concern for godliness, we are taken very close to a concern for law, and this concern for law takes us very close to legalism. Because of this, legalism can be a danger for any Christian, which is why we should take measures to protect ourselves against it.

Even if our newly born concern for godliness does not work against us, then our natural imbalance will put us in danger of legalism. Most people are not moderate by nature, and I have long since decided that humans in general tend toward extremism. Among religious people, this extremism becomes fanaticism, and Christians are not exempt from this problem. Most of the debates, controversies, and divisions within Christianity have been caused by extremism. Many of these divisions have happened because someone had a good idea that they took to a wrong extreme, and then others reacted by running to the opposite extreme. If you have any doubt about this, just look at the divisions we see in the history of Christian theology. We have charismatics and cessationists; churches with privileged clergy,

and churches with no ministers at all; some Arminians who say that God does not know the future, and some Calvinists who see no reason to pray.

This imbalance among Christians even reveals itself with something as basic as obedience. Christians have been divided on what attitude we should have toward the commands of Scripture. On one side is the libertine, who sees no problem at all with practicing wickedness and allowing other Christians to do the same without correction. On the other side is the legalist, who has turned obedience itself into a new form of wickedness. This is all due to the imbalance that we naturally experience, whether as humans or as Christians.

All that we have observed so far proves that legalism is a prominent danger for the entire church. Whether due to temperament, extremism, or just good intentions gone bad, every Christian faces the risk of legalism. Based on what I will tell you later in this series about church history, I am inclined to believe that legalism is a permanent feature of Christianity. We have never been able to get away from it, and we probably never will until Christ returns. And while I encourage you to exercise restraint in identifying other people as legalists, at the same time I want to clearly state that legalism does exist and is a great threat.

I want to be clear that, when I speak of the dangers of legalism, I am including present company. It is easy to say, "Oh yes, legalism is a problem. . . for churches out there." It is more difficult to examine your own self for the problem, especially when the problem has had two thousand years of practice hiding in plain sight. However, though it is difficult, the health of this very church depends upon us being able to define and escape legalism. Our service to Christ demands it.

On that note, the danger of legalism does not merely reside in its widespread causes. The danger also resides in its ultimate effect: robbing Christ of his glory. Some forms of legalism require us to perform certain deeds in order to merit salvation. That kind of legalism obscures or prevents true conversion. In that case, legalism steals the glory of Jesus as Savior, for it is only

by his work (not ours) that we are saved. Other forms of legalism greatly distort our view of the Christian life. That kind of legalism makes Christianity a tedious, exhausting, dreadful way to live. In that case, legalism steals glory from Christ by making his kingdom seem repulsive. In either case, the honor of Jesus Christ is threatened. Added to that, when Christ is not held forth in his glory, Christianity loses its glory, too. People either join us due to some misplaced desire to earn salvation, or they reject the Christian life as oppressive and self-righteous. A group of Christians cannot long survive the unchecked growth of legalism in its midst.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF STUDYING LEGALISM

Now that I have shown why legalism is worthy of our attention, I want to explain why I will dedicate so many sermons to it. There is a saying about swatting a fly with a sledgehammer, and I will admit to using a sledgehammer. But in my defense, legalism is a big fly – and it is something we need to kill. As for why I am using a fifteen-sermon sledgehammer, I consider so many sermons necessary for defining and understanding legalism, for that is no easy task.

As a rule, I prefer to define my key terms. Some of you may have noticed that I am well into this sermon and have yet to give a definition of legalism. The absence of a definition so far is an illustration of how hard it is to define legalism. At the beginning of all my study, I was confident that legalism referred primarily to some “misapplication of the law” in a person’s relationship with God. That was my working definition, and I still believe it to be accurate, but it is not very instructive. My desire is to elaborate upon that definition to make it more precise and useful in examining oneself for legalism, but this has proven to be an agonizing task. Chiefly, I see three difficulties in establishing a good definition of legalism.

The first problem is that “legalism” is not a biblical term. Defining words like righteousness, baptism, or prophet is relatively easy, for you simply look at their biblical usage. People may

still differ in their interpretations of how such words are used, but the method is simple enough. The term legalism, however, is never used in the Bible. After doing a thorough online search of fifty-two English Bible translations, I found the word to be virtually absent. Two versions use the term occasionally in summary headings: NKJV and The Voice. Three versions use it in the text as a negative translation of “law”: the Complete Jewish Bible, The Message, and the Orthodox Jewish Bible. But again, these three versions only occasionally use it to translate the word for law. No Hebrew or Greek term, used in either Testament of Scripture, can be translated literally as “legalism” or anything similar. Because of the biblical absence of this term, we lose the best way to define it.

The second problem with defining “legalism” is that the term tends to be purely accusatory. The majority of the time, it is used to accuse someone else of wrongdoing. This makes legalism a most peculiar –Ism. For most –Isms, you can usually find someone who will profess that ideology. In that case, you can always find a person to explain what the term means. If I want to know what Presbyterianism is, I can find a person who calls himself a Presbyterian and have him explain it to me. If I want to know what Mormonism is, I find a person who identifies as a Mormon, and he can explain it. The problem with legalism, though, is that people rarely classify themselves as legalists. The moment you call someone else a legalist, he will immediately begin to argue that he is not a legalist. As I said before, “legalist” is a purely accusatory term. It is like the terms hyper-Calvinist, terrorist, baby-killer, etc. No one describes himself with those terms, because they are inherently accusatory. All of this leads us back to the same problem: you can never find a legalist who is willing to explain legalism.

Our third problem is related to the second: Christians have different understandings of what legalism is. This returns to the fact that legalism is an accusatory term. Because of its accusatory nature, we tend to use the term for anyone whom we consider incorrect in their approach to obedience. Since the term is used so freely, it has developed many different meanings. And

so we find ourselves in a position much like the snake eating its own tail. Certain Christians would accuse our own church of being legalistic in some way or other. Meanwhile, our own church would accuse some other church of being legalistic. The situation is somewhat humorous, but it also presents a conundrum: how do we define legalism if we all have different definitions of it?

The aforementioned problems are the kinds of difficulties we will face in this series. In the midst of my study and research, the thought occurred to me, why not just retire the term legalism altogether? This is a word which eludes easy definition and which everyone understands differently. Legalism is a classic “slippery term” with all its attendant problems. If that is the case, why not get rid of it? The answer is, we need this word. We will not be able to survive as Christians without this word. The Bible warns us against real misapplications of law. In life, we must guard against those misapplications. We must also oppose those misapplications in other people. All of this is hard to do if you don’t have a word for it.

We could, of course, coin a new word. Let’s say we call it “command-ism” instead. But then most people will just stare blankly at you. The more insightful people will blink and say, “Oh, you mean legalism?” And then we will be right back where we started. Furthermore, any new word will most likely meet the same fate as the old word: it will die the death of a thousand accusations. Let’s face it: we cannot escape the word legalism, and we should not try. For that reason, we need to define it, clarify it, and then put it to good use. I believe we can do so.

OUTLINE FOR THIS STUDY

The final thing I want to do in this sermon is present an outline for the series. The general flow of this series will follow four stages: definition, clarification, admonition, and application.*

* In my original sermon, I described a twelve-sermon outline. In the course of the series, I added three more sermons, created a fourth stage, and redistributed the material somewhat. The outline presented in this book has been updated accordingly for the benefit of the reader.

The first stage is **Definition**, meaning that we will try to develop a better definition for legalism. If we are to rise above the problems that I've already described, this stage is critical. If you cannot define legalism, then you can neither identify it nor fight it.

To that end, the second sermon will deal with definition by negation: that is, what legalism is not. In that sermon, I will describe Proper Laws for the Christian. You might call this a non-legalistic guide to personal righteousness.

The third sermon will further our effort toward definition by studying the Five Forms of Legalism. This message will study biblical passages which describe misapplications of law. I want to make sure that what I am presenting is founded on Scripture, so that you can see these are not just ideas from my own head. I believe that all biblical portrayals of legalism fall into five forms, and we will look at Scripture and see where actual people made these mistakes and how we can learn from them.

In the fourth sermon, we will take another step toward defining legalism. That sermon will paint a portrait of the legalist. The main goal of that sermon will be to describe The Three Vices of Legalism. These vices are contentiousness, hypocrisy, and a certain kind of dependence, which I will describe at that time. We will see what a legalistic person looks like according to the Bible.

The fifth sermon will be our last step in defining legalism. At that time, I will pull all the prior information together and state a concise, accurate, and useful Definition of Legalism. I want this to be a definition that can actually be applied to your life and to the lives of others. I will also spend some time distinguishing my definition from other, less helpful definitions. By the end of this first stage, we should have a good definition of legalism, and this will allow us to move on to the next stage.

Stage two is dedicated to **Clarification**. Even with a good definition of legalism, we will still need to do some fine-tuning. By this time we will have a visual of the target, but we will still need to adjust the sights.

As part of that, sermon six will address Legalism and the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses has possibly fueled more legalism than anything else in the history of God's dealings with humanity. For that reason, I would consider myself irresponsible if I failed to clarify the proper role of the Mosaic Law for the Christian.

The seventh sermon will be called The Three Vices of Legalism...Revisited, which will return to the three vices discussed in sermon four. I will need to be somewhat brief in sermon four, because I will not want to lose sight of defining legalism. But so much needs to be said about contentiousness, hypocrisy, and dependence, that another sermon will be needed. Sermon seven is my chance to revisit those vices.

Sermon eight will have a rather cumbersome topic: Legalism and Interpretation. I think the accusation of legalism is often raised with regard to disagreements over how to interpret passages of Scripture. I will argue that this way of dealing with other Christians is incorrect and unhelpful. This is part of my effort to restrain us from unduly charging other Christians with legalism.

The ninth sermon, on the other hand, is the exact opposite. In that sermon, I want to identify some contemporary Examples of Legalism. I think that pointing to some real-world examples will clarify what legalism is. Hopefully, by the end of sermon nine, I will have sufficiently clarified my understanding of legalism.

That will bring us to stage three of this study: **Admonition**. My goal in that third stage will be to make this church, and any church similar to our own, feel the gravity of legalism, to make sure we take action against it.

To begin that stage, I will dedicate sermon ten to a Brief History of Legalism. This sermon will track the presence of legalism among our own spiritual ancestors. My purpose is to convince you that legalism is a great threat to us in particular. To do that, I will show you how legalism can corrupt even the purest forms of Christianity—or what we consider to be its purest forms.

Sermon eleven will review some Good Practices Gone Bad. We will take a look at how even practices that are good in their nature can sometimes go wrong. This sermon will have some

similarities to the previous sermons, because I want to show you how respected Christian practices have deformed into legalism. Again, if I can show you that even correct practices can fuel legalism, I think you have all the more reason to beware.

Sermon twelve will bring all of this as near to our own church* as possible: Our Risk for Legalism. In this sermon, I will survey some of this church's distinctive practices and discuss how they could possibly be distorted into legalistic religion. There is simply no better way to get you thinking in terms of self-preservation, and this will close the Admonition stage of the series.

The final stage of this study is the stage for **Application**. Whether for your own sake, or to help other Christians from being ensnared in legalism, you need to know how to defend against it and grow in true godliness.

The application will begin with sermon thirteen, called Evasive Action. This message is designed primarily for Christians who have already come to see some legalistic tendencies in their life right now. For their sake, I want to address all the five forms of legalism, and all three vices of legalism, and give some advice on how to escape all of them.

Sermon fourteen is intended to bring you from a commandment-focused life to a character-focused life. For that reason, it is called From Commandment to Character. A mature view of the Christian life understands that commandments are only a means to a greater end: which is, to build good character. Understanding this principle is the hinge for turning away from legalism toward authentic godliness.

Finally, we will come to sermon fifteen: Walking by the Spirit. Though walking by the Spirit is a concept much broader than our discussion of legalism, I believe that clarifying this hazy idea, and learning how to live it, will move us further from legalism and closer to what God wants for us in Christ.

* Readers of this book should not skip this particular sermon, since it may provoke you to more careful thought about your own church. Also, your church is perhaps not so different from mine, in which case any admonition to my own church will still land with some weight on yours.

SUMMARY

I recognize that I have put a lot of information before you, so I want to take a moment to reflect on what's been presented. To refresh your memory, allow me to present a quick summary of what we have discussed thus far.

First, I commented on the dangers of legalism, and how it basically reduces to two points: One, legalism is a widespread threat for all Christians. Two, the result of legalism is that it robs Christ of his glory.

In my second heading, I discussed why this topic is so difficult that it requires an entire series. I stated that it is predominately a problem of defining legalism, but I also said that a definition is necessary, so we will take as much time as needed to establish one.

Lastly, I gave you a brief outline of this series and the direction we are going. We will begin with an effort to create a good definition of legalism, proceed to clarification, continue with admonition, and end with application.

I hope with all that I have presented, that you are able to see how thorough I am trying to be with this study. As I was preparing and researching this topic, it occurred to me that most treatments of legalism are very cursory. Christians usually treat legalism in an offhanded way, or as a footnote, or perhaps an addendum. The mistake we often make is that we assume an understanding of legalism, but have never given much consideration as to what legalism truly is. In light of that, I think it is good to hit the topic as hard as possible, all at once, so that you can have solid, Bible-based ideas. After all, you will need this knowledge for the rest of your life in order to guard yourself against legalism, and to evaluate your brothers and sisters fairly on the matter.