

The Morality Of Legalism

By Mark E. Benjamin

If you mention the word “legalism” to many people, you might receive a negative response. Most think that to be legalistic is to be unproportionately devoted to the laws in the Old Testament. To be living under old-fashioned laws and thereby placing yourself under the unrealistic demands of those laws handed down from long ago. All the while trying to forcibly place others under these laws.

I’m not sure this is a proper interpretation of the definition of legalism. Obviously legalism does have to do with law, but not from such an unemotional and calculated point of reference. It also has a much more uplifting connotation to it than this.

Legalism Defined

The dictionary that I used defines legalism as “Strict, literal adherence to the law or to a particular code, as of religion or morality.” The first thing that caught my attention in that definition was the presence of the word “morality”. So of course, I had to look up the word morality. One of its definitions is “Concern with the distinction between good and evil or right and wrong; right or good conduct.” Well that’s interesting. Let’s do a little substitution for “morality” in the legalism definition. We could say that legalism is the “strict, literal adherence to the law as with the distinction between good and evil.” In other words, right is right and wrong is wrong; and you follow what is right no matter what.

What does GOD have to say about this? Is this definition proper and ordained by God? **Amos 5:14 (NAS) Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and thus may the LORD God of hosts be with you, just as you have said! 15 Hate evil, love good, and establish justice in the gate!...** The New Testament doesn’t tolerate it any more either. **Colossians 3:25 (NIV) Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism.** It’s quite simple, go after good and hate what is evil. Right is right and wrong is wrong – follow it.

Our morality is defined by what we do and say with what is right and wrong. Side note; notice I didn’t state “with what we **say** is right and wrong.” Right is still right and wrong still wrong, even if we say otherwise. But our morality is what we **do** with the good and evil. If you are Jewish, Christian or something else, and wish to live a moral life, you must follow after what is right and good, and flee from what is wrong and evil. Part of the definition of morality is “right or good conduct.” It’s what we “do” with right or wrong. Morality isn’t trying to say what is right – it’s just being concerned with finding out what it already is and following it.

Let’s bring it back to our definition of legalism – the following of the laws of morality. If you are concerned with doing what is right and good, then you wish to be a moral person. To determine what is right and wrong we need to go to a source that is untainted by personal opinions. One that sees the big picture and knows what is right and wrong. We go to the Bible. It does not matter if you want to look in the Original Testament or the New Testament; the LORD still spells out what is right or not. That is the Law of GOD. Again, first half or second half is irrelevant; the law is written there. By stating, you will live your life by what is right in the eyes of the LORD – whether Jew or Christian – then that is obeying His laws. That sounds to me like the strict, literal adherence to the law as with the distinction between good and evil ... You bet ya, legalism.

A truly moral person is in fact a legalist. In many circles, the word “legalist” is thought to be quite negative. It is thought that legalism is to be more concerned with following laws than to do anything else – and as if that is a bad thing. Some believe that you should shy away from this practice. That if you are legalistic, it is stubbornness or piety being displayed and not righteousness or morality. But yet most of these people want to also live a moral life. This produces somewhat of a quandary, but there you have it. To be a moral person you have to do what is right. To do what is right, you have to make the distinction between right and wrong. If you make that distinction, and adhere to it, then you are legalistic.

Prohibition, Live And Well

Still not convinced? I didn’t believe it myself until I saw it there in front of me. Let’s try to unravel this. Come with me then to the 1920s in the United States. Prohibition was enforced. Alcohol was illegal. That was the law – it was undisputed. If caught with alcohol, you went to jail. It was later appealed and the law was made null and void.

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Today alcohol is legal and if I wished, I can legally buy and drink alcohol. However, my wife and I do not drink – ever.

Why? Prohibition was appealed long before my wife and I were born and we are well past the legal age to acquire alcohol. There is nothing legally stopping us. Some would even say that there is nothing morally stopping us. It is an old, outdated, done away with, covered-over law. And yet to observe us you would think prohibition was still enforced. This should be easy to understand. Our choice has nothing to do with prohibition; it has nothing to do with any law. It has to do with the way we choose to live our lives, to live a higher moral life.

I'm sure that somewhere out there is someone that might say we are living under the yoke of an old law. We are being "legalistic" in the negative sense of the word. Living under the yoke of an old law implies that it is burdensome. Doing without alcohol is not a burden for us, it's a choice. It might look like we are legalistic in this area, as if we are living under the law. It could seem as if we have brought back this law. I can understand that way of thinking, although I don't agree with it.

If we choose to live by a law, whether it is still enforced or not, are we being legalistic or just living by our morals? I hope you would agree in this case that living by a law, even if that law is no longer valid, is simply living a moral life not a legalistic one. It's a choice that we make. But then again, we defined legalism as having to do with morality. So it actually is legalistic to make this choice.

Since that logic works for a man made law, is there any reason why it wouldn't work for a GOD made law? Of course not.

I Choose Law

Today there are many – far too many – that say what they call the Old Testament is no longer valid. It is full of laws that have been done away with by the New Testament. Whether or not that is true; I'm not going to debate here. I'll save that for some other time – but I'm sure you can guess my thoughts on it. However, even if the Original Testament has been done away with, does it make a difference to its contents? The first part of the Bible does have many laws. No one would say otherwise. Just as living a life without alcohol, even though the law has been removed, is a life choosing to live by a higher moral standard; someone might want to choose to follow the laws of the Old Testament – even if the laws have been appealed. Again from the desire to live morally.

Like the following of prohibition when it is no longer thought of as a law; so too is the following of GOD's laws, no matter where they are found in the Bible. The following of a law from the Bible is not legalism in the negative way. It is, however, legalism in our definition of the word. It is being concerned with right and wrong and wanting to follow what is right.

Following the laws of GOD allows for the ultimate distinction between right and wrong, and good and evil. It provides the guidelines needed for right or good conduct. In other words, morality. Choosing to live a moral life with no exceptions is a strict, adherence to that morality. Legalism.

It still might seem to some that a choice of legalism is a choice to go back under the burden of old laws. As if to put chains on that have been removed. All I can say in response to that is to read **Joshua 24:15(NIV)** But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." To follow GOD's law you might say has become a morality our family has chosen to strive for.

So I say to you; be a Legalist and be proud of it. You ought to be concerned with the distinction between right and wrong and wish to follow after it; to be a legally moral person.