

Do You Know Any Legalists?

“But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, be ye holy; for I am holy.” 1 Peter 1: 15, 16

Have you ever been called a **legalist**? Or been accused of being **legalistic**?

These are derogatory terms used primarily by Christians towards other believers who have a **higher standard of holiness** than they themselves have. Such Christians give this definition to **legalism**: “strict, literal and excessive conformity to the law of God; living by a restrictive moral code.”

The issue that is truly important is whether the Bible teaches this definition of legalism. No, it does not. The Bible teaches that:

- We are to be holy like God is holy (1 Peter 1: 15, 16).
- We are to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:24).
- Obedience is the mark of a good Christian (1 Peter 1:14, 22; 2:8; 3:1,6; and 4:17).
- God never warns that we can be excessively conformed to His Word.
- Legalism and legalist are words not found in the Bible.

Until this new meaning was given to legalism, it used to mean (according to Webster’s Dictionary) “the doctrine of salvation by good works; reliance upon works for salvation.” Now, the Bible has a lot to say about that! The books of Romans and Galatians deal with this heresy. Salvation is totally by faith apart from any works of the law (Romans 3:27, 28). Those who teach you that a person must keep the law to obtain salvation, or to maintain salvation, are perverting the gospel of Christ and are therefore accursed (Galatians 1:6-9). The real legalist is a person trying to earn salvation by doing good works. I’ve met many such people.

What about those who do have a higher standard of holiness than you or me? I don’t want to be critical of them, but rather to be respectful and considerate. It may well be that they know more of the holiness of God than I do, and that they have grown more spiritually than I have.

One more parting thought. What is the opposite of legal? **Illegal**.

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