

Legalism Some Thoughts

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It seems that it is the destiny of all who pursue Torah-living to be labelled by some as “legalists.” If not often, at least occasionally we hear the warning (sometimes from very sincere and loving brothers and sisters in the L-rd) that our view of the Torah is either legalistic or leads to it. While such warnings may at first seem bothersome, we should listen and take heed. A wrong use of the Torah, after all, is surely not honoring to HaShem or His Messiah, Yeshua.

But if we are to take seriously (as we should) the warnings we are given about legalism, we must first of all understand what the term means, and this is a problem. It's a problem first of all because it seems clear that people use the term differently. And secondly, the definition of “legalism” is difficult because there is no biblical term which corresponds.

Sometimes the people that have spoken to me about legalism seem to imply that what they mean by the term is when my actions make them or others feel uncomfortable. “Whether or not you intend it,” they say, “your life-style puts pressure upon those around you, as though they should do what you're doing, and that makes them feel uncomfortable.” But this can hardly be a valid definition of “legalism”. The issue at hand is not whether we feel comfortable with our life-style and actions, *but whether or not our life-style and actions honor G-d*. However, there is something to be heeded in this approach: whenever our pursuit of Torah projects an air of superiority, or a disdain of others, we have missed the mark. A true pursuit of Torah as guided by the Ruach will inevitably bring humility, not arrogance (Jms 3:17).

Another common approach to this thing called “legalism” is the viewpoint that somehow it rears its ugly head whenever there is a call to obedience. It appears that some feel legalism is that form of teaching that says “you must”. What these people would rather hear is “you are free to”, implying “you should want to”, so when someone teaches “you must”, there is the suspicion of “legalism”. Now this combination of obedience and desire is surely an intricate one. Would we not all agree that obedience from the heart is the goal to which we all are striving (1Pt 1:22)? Yet how often has it been the case that doing what is right because it is right (not necessarily because my heart was in it) produced a change of heart toward G-d as well as toward my fellow man? Our L-rd Yeshua Himself instructed the people, “Why do you call me L-rd, L-rd, and not *do what I say?*” (Lk 6:46, cf. Mt 7:18-21) and again, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” (John 14:15). If we call ourselves the disciples of Yeshua, then we are obligated to keep His commandments. This sounds very much like a “you must” category to me.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary (Complete)* the following definition for “legalism” is given: “Applied reproachfully to the principles of those who are accused of adhering to the Law as opposed to the Gospel; the doctrine of justification by works, or teaching which savours of that doctrine.” Baxter (1651) is quoted as saying, “To make salvation the end of Duty, is to be a legalist.” The *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Moody, 1989), p. 620, implies that “legalism” is seen when groups add “statements regarding behavior to doctrinal statements”. Historically the definition of the English word “legalism” is clear—it is the belief that one can acquire salvation by doing good works.

Let us pause for a second and ask ourselves honestly—do we think that somehow because we are attempting to obey G-d through a Torah-pursuant life-style we are actually earning our salvation? If even a hint of such a thing adheres to our belief, we have diminished the glory of Messiah and disregarded the agony of His atoning death on our behalf. For if we could gain even an ounce of righteousness through our good works, then we could logically gain it all. And if such were possible, then Yeshua died needlessly, and the Gospel is a hoax. What is more, all of the sacrifices described in the Torah are nothing more than pagan rituals borrowed from pagan worship. No! Let us affirm again and again that all of our righteous deeds are like filthy rags in HaShem's sight, and that in reality we have no good works. If we have any righteousness, it is given to us by G-d Himself on the basis of Yeshua's death, and if we are able to perform the mitzvot it is because we have been empowered to do so by G-d's own Ruach. “For by grace you have been saved, through faith, *and that not of yourself, it is the gift of G-d.*” (Eph 2:8); “And Abraham believed G-d, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness.”

(Gen 15:6).

As we affirm in heart and teaching that our salvation is entirely the work of HaShem and not our own, we may set ourselves once again to showing Him we love Him by doing what He commands. Once we are clear on how we have right-standing before HaShem, then we are motivated to follow His commandments. “And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, “I have come to know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.” (1Jn 2:3-6) Having confessed Yeshua as L-rd and Savior, we thus set ourselves to “walking as He walked”—we commit ourselves to His halakah, and this is not legalism, but obedience.

Paul affirms this when he writes, “Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law” (Rm 3:31). Once faith has been granted and exercised in the heart of the believer, the resultant life-style establishes the Law, for in doing the commandments the righteousness of G-d is lived out in the life of the child of G-d. And this is not legalism—it's obedience.

All things of beauty and worth can be misused: “grace” can be deformed into license; “faith” can be misapplied and yield apathy; “worship” can evolve into idolatry; “ministry” can decompose into pride; and Law can degenerate into legalism. How can we guard ourselves against making what is beautiful into what is rancid? We must always keep the written word and the Living Word our primary focus—we must *walk* (i.e., do halakah) by faith, not by sight.