

Legalism

I remember talking to a lady in my church who said that when she was growing up, she and her siblings weren't allowed to play games like "Yahtzee" or "Monopoly," since these games used dice. As well, they couldn't play card games, like "Old Maid," or "Go Fish," or any other games using cards. Her father's thinking was that, as dice are sometimes used when gambling, and since he believed any gambling was sin, he concluded that any use of dice must also be sinful. Likewise, he knew that some types of cards, like Tarot cards, were used in sinful practices like fortune-telling and divining information. Therefore, he concluded that any use of cards must be evil. While some might agree with her dad's rules, others might think he's being legalistic. What is legalism, and does the Bible provide principles so that we can avoid being legalistic? This essay aims to address this topic so that we can avoid heaping spiritual burdens upon others.

Legalism happens when someone tries to impose a standard of righteousness upon others, when that standard doesn't produce righteousness at all. In other words, legalism is the excessive and improper use of laws or rules, for righteousness' sake. For example, someone might say, *"All rock music is evil, and anyone who listens to it is sinning!"* The reality is, some rock lyrics are sinful, but rock music is not innately sinful. Legalism focuses on rules instead of a relationship with Jesus. The late Pastor Timothy Keller once said, *"Legalism is looking for something besides Jesus Christ in order to be acceptable before God."*

The book of Acts tells us that in the years that followed Jesus' resurrection, the Christian Church experienced incredible growth. Many Jews in and around Jerusalem had converted to Christianity. Roughly three years after Jesus' resurrection, a Christian named Stephen was put to death for his faith. Following Stephen's death, a great persecution broke out in Jerusalem, led by a man named Saul. We see this persecution in Acts 8:1, ***"Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."*** As usual, what Satan does to bring harm and chaos, God turns into something good. This persecution was the means that God used to fulfill His instructions to the Church, which was that they take the gospel throughout Samaria, and to the remotest parts of the earth. As Christians fled Jerusalem, they ministered in the regions and nations to which they had been scattered. As a result, many Gentiles would be converted to Christianity. Gentile was a term used for people that were not Israelites.

In all this, Saul continued to hunt down Christians for the purpose of killing them or putting them in prison. While Saul was busy persecuting Christians, Jesus appeared to him; resulting in Saul's conversion. Saul turned in faith and entrusted himself to Jesus. Fast forward many years; Jesus eventually deployed Saul to preach to the Gentiles. In doing so, Saul used the Gentile version of his name, Paul. Paul became one of the most prominent apostles and wrote a significant portion of the New Testament. This goes to show that the Lord can change the hearts of any man, even using Christian killers, like Saul, to become champions for His glory!

The Church was growing; now with a large number of Gentile converts in the mix. As Jewish converts gathered for worship with Gentile converts, there began to arise disputes amongst them, based on their backgrounds. Soon legalistic expectations began to be heaped upon the newer Gentile converts. We see in Acts 15:1, ***"Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."*** Jewish converts from Judea (which was the land of Israel) came to Antioch, where Paul was preaching, and these men insisted that the Gentile converts must adhere to Jewish circumcision. This faulty teaching naturally caused division in the Church. These men from Judea were known as Judaizers: Jewish converts to Christianity who believed that Christians were still bound

to the ceremonial Laws of Moses; of which circumcision was a prominent obligation. Circumcision was a covenant sign that God gave to Abraham. This outward sign required removing the foreskin from the penis. This was done to indicate that a male was ethnically a part of the nation of Israel. Israelites did this to their newborn boys when they were eight days old. Circumcision was also done to Gentile men who decided to become Israelites, as part of their assimilation into the ethnic nationality of Israel. Aside from being a bodily mark of one's ethnic identity, circumcision also had physical benefits. God promised Abraham that his offspring would be as vast as the stars in the sky, and circumcision helped bring that about. There were far less germs spread to Jewish wives because of the cleaner nature of their sex, helped by the husband's circumcision. The bottom line, circumcision marked a man as an ethnic Jew, and helped bolster more Jewish offspring by healthier sex. Even today, people of various ethnic backgrounds continue to circumcise their baby boys, simply as a matter of hygiene.

It's critical to know that the ceremonial Law, which included circumcision, was abolished at the death of Jesus, and was not required any longer, for anyone. Judaizers were those that struggled to let go of the ceremonial Law, as they failed to understand that through Christ, there is freedom from being bound to these now outdated practices. These practices never produced righteousness to begin with, and adhering to them even now creates a false sense of righteousness. Paul referred to those Judaizers that struggled to let go of the Law as "*weaker brothers*," because they were less mature in their understanding. That phrase "*weaker brother*," is not meant as an insult, but as a caution to other Christians, so that more mature Christians would show patience and kindness to their weaker brethren who were slower to understand and embrace God's expectations. Although saved, weaker brethren are still learning to let go of their prior identity. In fact, here in Acts 15, we see that some in this particular group of Judaizers were former Pharisees (Acts 15:5), and Pharisees had historically been very rigid about adhering to the Law of Moses.

"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." This claim is in violation of truth, and serves as a perfect example of legalism. Jewish converts were telling Gentile converts that they needed to first convert to Judaism, and then they were qualified to become Christians. In short, Judaizers argued that Christianity was a sub-group within Judaism. Paul saw that the matter had become quite divisive, so Paul decided that the matter should be resolved with the other apostles in Jerusalem, so that everyone would have consensus. Jerusalem at that time, was the hub of the apostles and elders of the Christian Church. This gathering became known as the Council at Jerusalem.

At this council, Church elders and apostles dialogued over the best practices for assimilating Gentile converts into the Church. There are two main considerations. The first consideration asks, is there a truth violation? For example, telling Gentile converts, "*You must be circumcised in order to be saved*," is a truth violation, and must be immediately dismissed. The second consideration asks, is there the appearance of sin? This second consideration is less obvious than the first, but seeks to avoid the appearance of evil. For example, telling Gentile converts that they ought to avoid eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. This wasn't a sin in and of itself, but could give the appearance that a person was engaged in idolatry.

At this council meeting, Judaizers held to their conformist views, and even stretched the expectation beyond circumcision, and said the following about Gentiles converts, ***"It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses,"*** Acts 15:5. Not only be circumcised, but also observe the whole Law of Moses. Keep in mind, the Jews had operated under the Law of Moses for 1,500 years, so it's understandable why some have a hard time letting go of their former identity. However, the Apostles stood on the foundation

of truth, and would not allow legalism to govern the Church. They preached that salvation was by faith alone; a free gift of God. They also acknowledged that the ceremonial Law was abolished.

First, the Apostle Peter reiterated these things, ***“And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are,”*** Acts 15:8-11. Peter went right to the heart of the issue, which essentially was, ***“Can men earn the favor of God?”*** The answer is, no.

Next, the Apostle James spoke. James was a key leader of the Jerusalem Church, especially as Peter had so often been away traveling. James was born to Mary and Joseph, and was a half-brother to Jesus. James had a special resurrection appearance from Jesus, all to himself (1 Corinthians 15:7), and James became a pillar of the Church (Galatians 1:19). Now at the Jerusalem council, James agreed with the other apostles; the ceremonial Law was abolished and Gentile converts ought not be put under the old Law.

James understood that, just as Jewish converts had been previously molded by the Law, Gentile converts had been raised with no ceremonial Law, and little morality in general. Gentile nations regularly practiced things that Jews deemed improper, such as rampant idol worship, and casual sexual standards. In Acts 15:19-20, James says, ***“Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.”*** Four things James suggested Gentile converts abstain from - 1) Things contaminated by idols, 2) Fornication, 3) Things strangled, and 4) Blood. Let's unpack these more carefully.

Things contaminated by idols – Idolatry is a sinful thing, but the instruction to ***“abstain from things contaminated by idols”*** referred to things that weren't sinful in and of themselves, but rather things that *appeared* to be idolatrous. For example, eating meat that was sacrificed to an idol. The appearance of evil was key. Keep in mind that feasting on grilled meat was a common incentive to worship an idol. Even after a Gentile turned to Jesus, the temptation was still there to indulge in this delicious BBQ. But just eating meat that had been used in idol sacrifice wasn't itself necessarily sinful. The Bible reiterates this fact in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 9:1-27. Essentially, if a Christian wants to buy sacrificed meat, and give thanks in Jesus' name for his dinner, there's no harm in that. It's only a sin if one eats that meat in honor of the false idol. However, the appearance of idolatry might be present as a weaker brother assumes that another Christian eating this meat is still clinging to past idolatry. Therefore, to avoid the appearance of idolatry, and to keep weaker brothers from stumbling, it's best to just abstain from anything that may be ***“contaminated by idols.”***

Fornication – Casual sex was another common incentive to worship an idol. Gentiles were raised practicing fornication without shame. Just to clarify what fornication is, it's sex between two people who are both single. Adultery is sex when at least one of the participants is married to somebody else. Both adultery and fornication have always been sin; acts of sexual immorality. A common way that Gentiles worshipped their deities was by going into a particular idol's temple and having sex with one of the temple prostitutes. It's easy to see how Gentiles would be lured into these Satanic practices, ***“Hey fellas, stop in on your way home for some amazing BBQ and some casual sex with any of our beautiful women!”*** But it wasn't just the men; temples had male prostitutes that Gentile women could visit. Of the four boundaries that the Jerusalem

council agreed upon, this one, “**abstain from fornication**” is the only one that is sinful in and of itself. The other three standards given by the council are spiritually indifferent, and simply deal with the appearance of sin. So, the point of adding an obvious sin (fornication) to this list, is that fornication was a common vice that Gentile converts might fall back into, compared to Jewish converts who were taught to see fornication in an entirely different light. The apostles were concerned that Gentile converts may hold on to some idolatrous practices in the same way Jewish converts held on to the ceremonial Law. On a related note, Paul speaks against all fornication in 1 Corinthians 6:9-20 and Ephesians 5:3.

Strangled animals – To the Jews, before they ate an animal, the manner in which that animal died was of great concern. For example, under the Law, Jews couldn’t eat animals that died of natural causes, or were killed by other animals. The reason being is that the blood would congeal inside the animal, making it unfit for Jews to eat. However, to Gentiles, this practice was of no concern at all, as keeping the blood in an animal was sometimes considered a greater delicacy. Besides, even under the old Law, the Lord said that Gentiles could eat an animal with its blood still in it. For example, Deuteronomy 14:21 says that animals killed by natural causes, could be given to a stranger to be eaten, or sold to a Gentile to be eaten. Therefore, the council at Jerusalem thought it was best that Gentile converts “**abstain from things strangled,**” so as to not cause their weaker Jewish brothers to stumble; as Jewish brothers were still very slow in accepting freedom from the Law. The Bible reiterates that Christian’s ought to be conscience of the weaker brother at all times (1 Corinthians 8:9-13).

Blood –Animal sacrifice has been a historically common practice amongst both Gentiles and Jews. Aside from health reasons to avoid eating animal blood, which might contain disease and toxins, Gentiles used blood from idol sacrifices in a variety of manners that were forbidden by God. Gentiles would drink it with idol sacrifices, or use blood to make covenants with idols. Gentiles also used bowls of blood for divination, similar to crystal ball gazing. Jesus’ death ended the practice of the ceremonial shedding of blood since He was the perfect and final sacrifice. In particular here, to avoid the appearance of idolatrous practices, Gentile converts were to abstain from handling blood. In short, it meant that if you were to kill an animal for dinner, you’d drain the blood, and not keep the blood around for any purpose, so as to avoid suspicion of idolatry.

At quick glance we might think, “Isn’t the purpose of this council to avoid legalism, like insisting that Gentile converts be circumcised? Aren’t some of these rules, like not eating certain types of meat, just other examples of legalism?” To understand this better, look at what the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22, ***“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.”*** Paul speaks of his self-denial, forgoing some of his freedoms in Christ Jesus for the benefits of others. Three types of people are mentioned here by Paul, 1) The Jews, who are under the Law (of Moses). 2) Those who are lawless in morals/ethics; i.e. the Gentiles. 3) The weak; those converts to Christianity that are still immature in their faith, and who haven’t yet embraced their freedom from useless standards. To each of these groups of people, Paul would make concessions, bending in behaviors without compromising doctrine, so that he would win the right to minister to all people, and lead some to freedom in Jesus. Paul knew that the relationship would determine one’s response to the gospel. Like a good missionary, Paul would adapt to one’s particular culture in order to earn the right to be heard.

As we continue to view the ministry of the apostles throughout the New Testament, several takeaways are evident. When the observance of the old ceremonial Law was urged as being necessary for justification, the apostles rejected it. When Jewish converts demanded that Gentile converts observe the Law, the apostles rejected it. But in all other cases, where no Jewish custom conflicted with the gospel, the apostles made no opposition to it.

So, the four standards set by the Jerusalem council teach that it's best to break off what appeared to validate idolatry. The council's heart was about giving converts time to adjust to freedom in Christ while moving away from ceremonial or pagan practices for the purpose of unity. For the Gentile converts, these standards kept them from being tempted to return to former idolatrous practices. For the Jewish converts, it was important to educate them about the importance of dismissing the old ceremonial Law, while also giving them grace due to their strict upbringing.

Legalism creates unnecessary and unhelpful barriers. Fortunately, Jesus doesn't do that with us. He doesn't say, *"You need to quit smoking, cussing, and cheating before you can come to Me."* A good question for each of us to consider is, *"Have I attempted to put an unreasonable standard upon anyone else?"* Or, *"Have I embraced any legalistic standard for myself that I need to shrug off?"*