

Who are Today's Legalists and Pharisees?

Lately, there have been many articles in professing Christian publications which address legalism. And most associate today's "legalists" (whoever they are) with the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Because Jesus had the most conflict with the Pharisees in his earthly ministry, we ought to take heed that we are not in their "legalistic" camp.

However, in many cases, "legalism" is confused with obedience to Jesus. And those who strive to keep Christ's commands are wrongly called "self-righteous Pharisees." I believe legalism is one of the most misused concepts among professing Christians. If their definitions are true, then Jesus Himself was a legalistic Pharisee, but we know that such a conclusion is impossible.

I see a common theme in many of these legalism articles that diminishes the Christian responsibility to obey Jesus. The underlying idea is that commandment-keeping faith is somehow opposed to the grace of God. In his article, *Four Characteristics of Legalism*, C. Michael Patton says, "Rule, laws, and lists of requirements are so much easier than grace and freedom."¹ Be careful with statements like this! What rules and laws are we talking about? Certainly legalistic and opposed to grace are church divisions and splits over what color a brother's shirt, socks, slacks or suspenders need to be. On the other hand, Christ has an eternal law in the New Covenant which consists of rules, laws and requirements. Jesus said,

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' (Matthew 7:21-23)

Commenting on this passage in his article *What is Legalism*, Matt Slick says, "Jesus condemns them because they were appealing to their salvation based on their faith and doing good. So it should be obvious that we do not keep our salvation by our efforts."² What is obvious about the passage is that Jesus told these professing Christians to depart because they practiced lawlessness, i.e., they were breakers of His law. Not because they were appealing to their salvation based on their doing good works. The Scriptures clearly teach that we will be judged by our works (Matthew 13:36-43, 47-50, 25:31-46, John 5:28,29, Acts 17:31, 24:15,16, Romans 2:5-11, 2 Corinthians 5:10, 11:15, 1 Peter 1:17, Revelation 20:12-13).

Jesus has a law and His law is not opposed to grace and freedom. In fact, "the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:11-12). The grace that brings salvation teaches us to live righteously. So why is it that righteousness is so often (mis)labeled as legalism? In his article *How to Spot a Legalist*, Greg Stier writes:

If we resist, [God] persists.
If we fail, [God] forgives.
If we lose our faith, [God] remains faithful (2 Timothy 2:13.)
That makes me want to serve Him all the more. Sorry legalists, but grace is a better fuel. . . . [G]race that cannot be abused is no grace at all.³

1 C. Michael Patton, "Four Characteristics of Legalism," *Credo House* Blog, March 14, 2015, http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2015/03/four-characteristics-of-legalism/?utm_source=Credo+House+Updates&utm_campaign=7cb673ceba-Christian_Legalism_Content_AB&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_759ca8ca12-7cb673ceba-60594441&mc_cid=7cb673ceba&mc_eid=4ad3de0123

2 Matt Slick, "What is Legalism," CARM, <https://carm.org/what-is-legalism>

3 Greg Stier, "How to Spot a Legalist," *Christian Post*, March 16, 2013, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/how-to-spot-a->

First of all, Stier left out the preceding verse of 2 Timothy 2 which demolishes what he was seeking to prove: “If we deny Him, He also will deny us” (2 Timothy 2:12). And where is the New Testament verse which says, “grace that cannot be abused is not grace at all”? In other words, according to Stier, if we can’t abuse God’s grace, then it is not really grace at all. On the contrary, the author of Hebrews wrote,

Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. And again, “The Lord will judge His people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:28-29)

Grace is not for abuse but for obedience. Paul is clear that grace is for obedience: “Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name” (Romans 1:5; cf. Romans 16:19,26). Paul speaks of grace and obedience together. As for grace that can be abused, read Romans 6:1-23.

In *8 Signs of a Legalistic Spirit – And How to Break Free*, J. Lee Grady says of legalists:

They can quote Scriptures about what Christ did for them, but they still feel they must work to earn His love. . . . [M]any Christians don’t have a revelation of God’s unconditional love. They feel they must earn His love by reading the Bible, praying and performing other religious tasks. Do you ever feel God is mad at you because you overslept and missed your morning devotions? He wants you to spend time with Him, but not to fulfill a duty. Chill out and just enjoy His love!⁴

Certainly we cannot earn God’s love, but Christians cannot abide in God’s love unconditionally like Grady claims. Jesus is clear that if we don’t keep His commandments, then we will be broken off and cast into the fire and burned. That doesn’t sound like “unconditional love” to me. Jesus said we must keep His commandments to abide in His love and thereby maintain our salvation. Yet Matt Slick, in *What is Legalism*, says that legalism “is where a person keeps the law in order to maintain his salvation.” This is not legalism, but the doctrine of Christ. Jesus said:

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. (John 15:5-10)

In his article, *How to Spot a Legalist*, Greg Stier writes,

21st Century Pharisees have replaced circumcision and keeping of the law with a more accepted evangelicalized list of do’s and don’ts. These pious sounding party poopers are getting Christians to doubt their salvation, get discouraged in their salvation and trying to prove, keep and/or earn their salvation.⁵

Let’s be clear. Jesus does have a list of do’s and don’ts. We cannot earn our salvation but, contrary to Stier’s claims, we should try to keep our salvation (see Jude 1:21) by keeping Christ’s

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4 J. Lee Grady, “8 Signs of a Legalistic Spirit – And how to Break Free,” *Charisma News*, December 4, 2014, <http://www.charismanews.com/opinion/46346-8-signs-of-a-legalistic-spirit-and-how-to-break-free>

5 Greg Stier, “How to Spot a Legalist,” *Christian Post*, March 16, 2013, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/how-to-spot-a-legalist-92015/>

commandments (John 15:5-10). And some professing Christians should doubt their salvation (see 1 Corinthians 11:27-28). And the author of Hebrews says that Christ “became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (Hebrews 5:9). The Apostle Peter said:

We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him. (Acts 5:29-32)

What is Legalism?

The word “legalism” is a relatively new term. The 1828 Webster’s Dictionary does not even contain the words “legalism,” “legalist,” or “legalistic.” Neither do these three terms occur anywhere in the Bible. The Greek language in the apostles’ day lacked any term corresponding to the distinct position of legalism. Why use a term which Jesus and the apostles never used?

So what exactly is a legalist? I would like to offer a couple of working definitions of legalism in this article. Generally speaking, both the Amish and Evangelicals are examples of legalistic groups, the former adhering to church rules as the way to salvation while the latter is creating ambiguities and inadequacies in the law of Christ to absolve themselves of any responsibility to obey it.

First are the legalistic Amish earning salvation by keeping church rules. One type of legalism is the belief that salvation can be earned by obedience to various laws. For instance, the Amish believe that keeping every church rule is the way to salvation. This type of legalism corresponds to the Judaizers adherence to circumcision and the Mosaic Law during the first century (See Galatians 3:10-12).

Like the Amish, the Pharisees were zealously devoted to a system of man-made traditions. For example, they did not eat unless they washed their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. When they came from the marketplace, they did not eat unless they washed. And there are many other things which they did like washing cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches (Mark 7:3,4). Certainly, devotion to these types of extra-biblical standards have nothing to do with righteousness and it is not what Jesus came to establish.

Though they speak English and Pennsylvania Dutch, the Amish read prayers and sing in Standard German at church services. But very few Amish can actually speak Standard German. This religious tradition gives new meaning to Paul’s words on speaking in tongues: “I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue” (1 Corinthians 14:18-19). For the Amish, reading religious books or the Bible in Standard German, a language which cannot be understood, is a dead religious tradition. Yet they believe that adherence to this tradition is part of the way to salvation. This is indeed legalism.

Amish traditions and rules also include the use of horse and buggy for local transportation, the rejection of electricity from public utility lines, the prohibition against televisions and computers, ending of formal education at the eighth grade, meeting in homes for worship every other Sunday, and living in rural areas.

If Amish members break the regulations of the church, they will face excommunication. Shunning involves not eating at the same table with someone who has been dismissed from the church. Again, the Amish legalistic traditions cause them to break the commandments of Scripture, this time going above and beyond the reasons for not eating with those who are named brethren. Paul wrote, “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person” (1 Corinthians 5:11).

And the Amish have inevitably fallen into the same hypocritical pitfalls as the Pharisees by adhering to their traditions. Amish rules forbid car ownership, but there is nothing against getting a lift by a taxi or a driver from outside the Amish church. Also, some Amish don't allow phones in their homes, but they have phones in shanties inside their garages or at the end of their driveways. Though they are devoted to their church rules as a way of salvation, many Amish have never truly entered the kingdom of God through the new birth. Thus, there are documented cases of incest, adultery, sexual abuse and substance abuse with Amish communities. This is pharisaical hypocrisy is not only for Amish, but also many professing Christians. A true modern-day Pharisee is a person who professes to follow Christ and yet disobeys what Jesus said. Jesus warned His disciples: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1). The following refrain occurs seven times in Matthew 23: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" (Matthew 23:13,14,15,23,25,27,29). A hypocrite means an actor, stage player, or pretender. There are many professing Christians who are actors today. Every Sunday morning is an act for them because their secret life is full of ungodliness and worldly lusts. Many pastors do not practice what they preach, much like the Pharisees (Matthew 23:3-4). During the week, they look at pornography and commit adultery, but on Sunday they put on a show. These are blind leaders of the blind (Matthew 15:14). Though they are "missionary-minded" and evangelistic, they only corrupt others with their evangelism. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves" (Matthew 23:15). Much like the Pharisees, many evangelistic professing Christians make false converts feel like they are born again because they have said the sinner's prayer or have a mere belief in Jesus. In reality, they are both going to hell. The Pharisees imagined God was their Father, but Jesus told them, "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do" (John 8:44).

Secondly are the legalistic Evangelicals looking for loopholes. Another type of legalism is that which looks for a loophole in order to get out of obedience to Christ's law. True legalists look for a way out of obedience like a legalistic lawyer who seeks to find a loophole in the wording of a contract. It is a legalistic attorney who studies to find a technicality within a document which creates a loophole. A legalist would emphasize the letter of the command in order to absolve themselves of obeying the intended meaning. Evangelicals, for example, have come up with perhaps as many loopholes as there are commandments in the New Testament. (I speak in general terms knowing that not each and every Evangelical necessarily holds to legalistic loopholes explained below, but I have found them very common among them.)

Jesus said, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). The Evangelical legalist finds many loopholes to this commandment. They say that this verse only applies to religious persecution. They say that Jesus allows His disciples to "blow away" (i.e. shoot to kill) somebody who would break into their home. They say that they can love their enemy and kill them at the same time. They say that this commandment applies to personal enemies but not to enemies of the state. Obviously these loopholes contradict one another. Nevertheless, to them it is totally compatible with Christianity to drop bombs on their enemies and shoot their enemies so long as they are wearing a military uniform or fighting in self-defense. But Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matthew 5:38-39). However, the Evangelical legalist, after turning the other cheek, will return blow for blow because turning the other cheek is all that the "letter of the law" demands of him. These legalists look for a loophole to Christ's clear commandments of non-resistance. Jesus said, "And from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back" (Luke 6:30). "If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you

do not turn away” (Matthew 5:40-42). The Evangelical legalist will say that he is only forbidden to sue his Christian brethren (according to 1 Corinthians 6:1-11), but suing unbelievers is totally acceptable. These professing Christians file lawsuits against people who wrong and cheat them, thinking they are justified. Again, these legalists entirely miss the point. Paul said, “Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated?” (1 Corinthians 6:7)

Jesus said, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mark 10:11,12); “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery” (Luke 16:18). The intent or spirit of Christ’s commandment forbids all divorce and remarriage because, according to Jesus, it is adulterous. But the legalist will try to find a loophole by focusing on the letter of the law. For example, a legalist will say that the letter of the law does not forbid a man to remarry if his wife divorces him. Granted, Jesus never said that a man who remarried after his wife divorced him commits adultery, but, based upon what Jesus did teach, one can fairly deduce that the same twice-married man would nonetheless be committing adultery because he is violating Christ’s intended meaning that “they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:6). If the woman who divorces her husband and marries another man commits adultery (according to Mark 10:12), then who is she committing adultery against? Her original husband of course. Therefore, she is still bound to her original husband (Romans 7:3; 1 Corinthians 7:39). Even though he was innocent, he is nonetheless bound to her. It cannot be that a woman who divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery while her husband is free to remarry. Either they are both still married to each other or both free to remarry. Since her subsequent marriage is declared adulterous, then the original marriage is still “joined together.” Many Evangelicals would rightly call upon two “married” homosexuals to separate from their sexually immoral and illegitimate “marriage”, even though there is not a Scripture which commands the separation. Yet they say that there is no command in Scripture to separate an adulterous “marriage” and thereby make an exception for this sin. Only a biblicist and legalist would build a case on silence like that because it gives them a loophole to escape repentance.

By the way, it was the legalistic Pharisees who “tested” Jesus about His teaching on divorce and remarriage and tried to “catch Him in His words” (Matthew 19:3ff.; cf. Mark 12:13; Luke 20:26). It was the legalistic Pharisees who looked for a loophole for them to divorce their wives. They said, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?” (Matthew 19:3) Nowadays, the divorce rate within the Evangelical church is similar to that of the world. And those who would call divorced and remarried people to separate from their adulterous remarriages are castigated as legalistic Pharisees. But it was the Pharisees who divorced their spouses because of the hardness of their hearts (Matthew 19:8; Mark 10:5). And it was the Pharisees who could not receive Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage (Matthew 19:12).

The Pharisees also found legalistic ways of finding religious loopholes to absolve them of any moral responsibility to obey God in many areas such as telling the truth (Matthew 23:16) and caring for their family members (Mark 7:10-12; cf. 1 Timothy 5:8). Jesus told the Pharisees,

All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban”—’ (that is, a gift to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do. (Mark 7:9-13)

This would be like a professing Christian spending thousands of dollars to go on a “mission trip” overseas instead of helping their father or mother with a practical need. Also, many wealthy Evangelicals live in large homes which they say belong to God or are “a gift to God” (i.e. “Corban”), yet they are not hospitable to “invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind” (Luke 14:13), to

“entertain strangers” (Hebrews 13:2), or hold church gatherings in their house (See Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:9; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2). Christians need to be able to judge what is covetous without being accused of legalism, even though covetousness is not clearly defined for us in the New Testament. Because it is actually the legalist who would look for a loophole (even a “biblical” loophole) which absolves them from charitable use of their time and resources. By the way, it was the Pharisees who were “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14), “full of greed and wickedness” (Luke 11:39), “full of extortion and self-indulgence” (Matthew 23:35). The Scriptures say that the “covetous . . . will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Though people say covetousness is legalistic to define, it is just as serious as fornication and is called idolatry (See Ephesians 5:3-5).

Fasting and other forms of self-denial have also tended to draw charges of legalism and asceticism. But Jesus took for granted that His disciples would fast when He said, “When you fast...” (Matthew 6:16ff.), not “If you fast.” Jesus also said, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23; cf. Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34). Paul the Apostle said, “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:27). Fasting, discipline, and self-denial are all part of discipleship, not to be confused with legalism.

Few would argue against the idea that the Amish are legalistic because of their church traditions. But many Evangelicals would be blind to their own religious traditions as a way to salvation or to nullify the commandments of Jesus. The “sinner’s prayer” for instance is an Evangelical tradition which is never found in the Scriptures (though it is printed in the pages of many modern New Testaments distributed by Evangelical organizations). They believe that saying the sinner’s prayer is essential to be saved, though it is a tradition absent from the doctrine of Christ. Like the Pharisees, professing Christians have established their own self-righteousness and forms of godliness rather than doing the things which Christ commands. Modern examples of this misguided zeal include:

- The “Sinner’s Prayer”
- The King James Version as the only Bible which constitutes God’s Word
- Christian Sabbath (Saturday or Sunday)
- Only one “sacred” name by which God is honored (the tetragrammaton, Jehovah, Yeshua, etc.)
- Dietary laws
- Christian holidays or Jewish “Feasts of the Lord” (especially when practicing these rituals is held necessary for salvation)
- Church buildings
- Church membership
- Altar calls
- Tithing
- Worship “services”

The list could be much more exhaustive. Legalistic works of the flesh will never satisfy God’s demands for obedience to the commandments of Jesus Christ. Even the “sacrifices of praise” being offered up to the Lord in churches today are vain unless they come from lives that are obedient to Jesus Christ.

The real problem Jesus had with the Pharisees was their disobedience to God because of their man-made traditions. Just like the Amish, most Evangelicals are legalistic in very similar ways to the Pharisees by creating traditions and rules which have absolutely nothing to do with the righteousness which Christ demands. Consider the tradition of tithing. Tithing is just a sad parody of an Old Testament levitical ordinance, but it is not required of Christians in the New Testament. The modern Evangelical tradition of tithing 10% of their income excuses a person from the commandment to

forsake ALL that they have! Jesus said, “Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:33). Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for tithing while neglecting the weightier matters such as “justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23). Many professing Christian leaders don’t think twice about taking advantage of poor people and requiring widows to tithe to their ministries, just as the Pharisees exploited widows and “devoured widows houses” (Matthew 23:14).

Other Evangelical traditions have been invented to nullify various New Testament commandments such as:

- not being angry or lusting (Matthew 5:21-30)
- not divorcing and remarrying (Matthew 5:31-32; Mark 10:11,12; Luke 16:18)
- not swearing oaths (Matthew 5:33-37)
- not resisting evildoers (Matthew 5:38-42)
- loving our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48)
- giving alms, praying and fasting in secret (Matthew 6:1-18; cf. Matthew 23:5)
- not serving money (Matthew 6:19-21)
- not worrying about food and clothing (Matthew 6:25-34)
- forgiving those who sin against us (Matthew 6:9-15; 18:21-22; Mark 11:25)
- inviting the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind to dinner (Luke 14:12-14)
- practicing church discipline (Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:4-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-14; 1 Timothy 5:20-22; Titus 3:10,11)
- greeting one another with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26)
- the head covering for women (1 Corinthians 11:2-16)
- not coveting, not talking foolishly, and not jesting (Ephesians 5:3,4)
- dressing modestly and not outwardly adorning (1 Timothy 2:9; 1 Peter 3:3)

Many disciples of Christ are accused of being Pharisees because they observe the clear commands of Scripture listed above and teach others to do the same. After all, in the Great Commission Jesus instructed us to teach disciples “to observe all things that I [Jesus] have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). But the more difficult the statements of Jesus become, the greater the tendency to explain them away by following religious traditions instead. Do you value your church traditions more than God’s word? Of the Pharisees, Jesus said, “For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men” (Mark 7:8); “You have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition” (Matthew 15:6). Are you easily offended by this? It was the religious and legalistic Pharisees who were offended (Matthew 15:12) and persecuted God’s prophets who told them the truth (Matthew 23:34).

And it is often religious leaders such as the pastors, the preachers, the teachers, the theologians, the authors, the reverends, the bishops, the deacons, the doctors, the elders, the chaplains, the priests, etc. which accuse obedient Christians of being legalistic Pharisees. All the while, Jesus opposed such titles and places of honor. Jesus said of the Pharisees,

They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi.’ But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:6-12)

Those modern-day Pharisees have degrees and positions which are highly esteemed among

men, but abominable to God (Luke 16:15). Thus the Pharisees “fear the people” (Mark 11:18,32; Luke 20:19); they fear the opinions of others and what people think about them.

Many of these legalism articles are quick to point out that legalists/Pharisees “would never be called a friend of sinners.” In *Four Characteristics of Legalism*, Patton says:

Christ was accused many times of being a “friend of sinners” (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34). He hung around tax-gatherers, prostitutes, and drunkards. . . .

Legalists do not have friendships with unbelievers. If they see you hanging out with unbelievers, they will accuse you of the same fleshly sins that they are engaging in or they will say you are condoning their sin by befriending them. At the very least they will say you are “walking the line” of compromise and are sure to give in.⁶

You are definitely an unloving person if you do not reach out to unbelievers. But let us keep in mind why Jesus hung out with sinners: to call sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). We ought to resemble Christ in befriending sinners. But this is not the loose kind of relationship which hyper-grace teachers envision. In our relationships with sinners, I hope we also say with Christ, “The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil” (John 7:7); “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you” (John 15:8). Jesus said that His word would divide even the strongest familial relationships: “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’” (Matthew 10:34,35).

Oftentimes, those who promote friendship with sinners simultaneously disdain other sinners and people groups. And it was the Pharisees who despised others and thanked God that he was better than others (Luke 18:9-11). The modern Evangelical Pharisee stands and prays thus with himself, “God, I thank You that I am not like other people—Muslims, Palestinians, abortionists, homosexuals or even as this Roman Catholic.”

What about dress codes?

German-Baptist-Men Many Amish affiliations as well as other various denominations have distinct dress codes. Are dress codes “legalistic” or required? In *8 Signs of a Legalistic Spirit – And How to Break Free*, Grady writes: “Some Christian denominations have taught that God demands strict conformity to dress codes. Some churches in the past have condemned makeup, jewelry, pants and short hair for women.”⁷ Where would churches get that idea? The Bible, of course: “In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing” (1 Timothy 2:9).

Actually, it is a legalistic woman who would create a loophole in this passage so that she could dress immodestly and wear jewelry. A legalists would read 1 Timothy 2:9 and argue, “It says modest apparel, but it doesn’t define modest. It only forbids gold and pearls, but not silver or other kinds of jewelry.” Relying solely upon “the letter” of 1 Timothy 2:9, a woman could justify all kinds of immodesty and cause her brother to stumble. Clearly, the intended meaning is that all jewelry is forbidden, even though Paul didn’t make an exhaustive list. Peter also says:

Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and

6 C. Michael Patton, “Four Characteristics of Legalism,” Credo House Blog, March 14, 2015, http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2015/03/four-characteristics-of-legalism/?utm_source=Credo+House+Updates&utm_campaign=7cb673ceba-Christian_Legalism_Content_AB&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_759ca8ca12-7cb673ceba-60594441&mc_cid=7cb673ceba&mc_eid=4ad3de0123

7 J. Lee Grady, “8 Signs of a Legalistic Spirit – And how to Break Free,” Charisma News, December 4, 2014, <http://www.charismanews.com/opinion/46346-8-signs-of-a-legalistic-spirit-and-how-to-break-free>

quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. (1 Peter 3:3,4, KJV)

Thus a godly woman must be pure inwardly and outwardly. It was the Pharisees who “outwardly appear righteous”, but inside were “full of all uncleanness, ... hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:27-28). Again, the problem with the Pharisees was their inward lawlessness and disobedience. The Lord will not rebuke you for obeying Him. If you are inwardly pure, you will desire to be outwardly pure also (See Matthew 23:26). There may be a professing Christian sister who wears the most modest dress, but has terrible worldliness in her heart. There may be a professing Christian sister who wears a veil according to 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, but is not in submission to her husband, a primary symbolic significance of the veil (1 Corinthians 11:3). Her inward impurity does not nullify her outward purity, but God requires both! It’s good and righteous to wear modest clothing, but Jesus demands both inward and outward righteousness. “Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also” (Matthew 23:26).

Still some truly legalistic Evangelicals have pointed to Matthew 23:5 as a “biblical” loophole to argue that modesty is Pharisaical and legalistic: “But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments.” First of all, phylacteries were small boxes affixed by a leather strap to one’s head and hand during prayer; Scripture passages were inserted in these boxes (this practice was based on Deuteronomy 6:8). Secondly, enlarging the borders of their garments had nothing to do with modesty. The word “border” is also translated “hem” in the New Testament and refers to the fringes or tassels which the Jews attached to the four corners of their garment to remind them of the Law of Moses (Numbers 15:37-41; Deuteronomy 22:12). As a Jew, Jesus wore these tassels (Matthew 9:20; 14:36; Mark 6:56; Luke 8:44). Jesus was not taking issue with modesty, but doing religious works (again traditions not found in the Bible) to be seen by men.

Others don’t observe modesty because they say it’s a minor issue. I disagree because the Bible has much to say about modesty. Even though we are not to major on minor issues (i.e. “Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel”), Christ will require both: “These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone” (Matthew 23:23). We should not ignore or neglect the little commandments or the major commandments. We should observe every commandment, especially the most important:

The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:29-31)

Grady is correct that “dress codes” can become legalistic. For example, it is legalistic when a church assembly divides itself in two over what color of shirts, socks, suspenders and slacks are required for men. That is ridiculous! On the other hand, Christians need to be able to declare what is modest and immodest for men and women, even though it is not spelled out for us in the New Testament. Dress codes are not required but modesty is required (1 Timothy 2:9; 1 Peter 3:3-4). Holiness is not legalism. The belief that women should not wear shorts, pants, tight clothing, or costly clothing has drawn charges of legalism. Such beliefs are not legalistic, but modest.

Stop Striving You Legalists

J. Lee Grady contrasts the legalistic spirit with “graceless Christianity.” He says, “Stop striving.”⁸ In *How to Spot a Legalist*, Greg Stier says that legalists “focus on things like turning, trying

8 J. Lee Grady, “8 Signs of a Legalistic Spirit – And how to Break Free,” *Charisma News*, December 4, 2014, <http://www.charismanews.com/opinion/46346-8-signs-of-a-legalistic-spirit-and-how-to-break-free>

and crying.”⁹ Likewise, in 4 Signs You Might be Legalistic, Blaise Foret says:

Every reformation throughout Church history focused on bringing people into a more effortless spirituality—where they find that the work of Christ more powerful and more effective than our own personal efforts. This doesn’t mean we do nothing as Christians, but it does mean we would do well to stop striving, slow down and find a renewed focus on the simplicity of the Gospel.¹⁰

Both of the above authors tell us to stop striving. There is a fair warning in being balanced because the striving of a Christian is not entirely dependent upon self-effort. We are enabled by God’s Spirit and strive in cooperation with God’s grace (See Romans 8:13; 1 Corinthians 15:10; Philippians 2:12-13; Colossians 1:28-29). But Foret speaks of Christianity as an “effortless spirituality.” Yet the Scriptures plainly say the opposite about Christianity. For example, Jesus said, “Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able” (Luke 13:24).

According to Jesus, Christianity is not a passive or effortless spirituality. We are deluding ourselves if we praise those who do nothing and if we say that Jesus is displeased with those who strive to obey Him. The apostles also spoke about striving, willpower and making every effort.

- I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men. (Acts 24:16)
- Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. (Philippians 3:12-15)
- For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe. (1 Timothy 4:10)
- Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)
- You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. (Hebrews 12:4)
- But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:5-11)
- Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, (2 Peter 3:14-15)

Continuing about “effortless spirituality” and ceasing from striving, Foret says:

9 Greg Stier, “How to Spot a Legalist, Christian Post, March 16, 2013, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/how-to-spot-a-legalist-92015/>

10 Blaise Foret, “4 Signs You Might Be Legalistic,” *Relevant Magazine*, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/practical-faith/4-signs-you-might-be-legalistic#x1QVQ3TMmzD4LiyY.99>

This very thing, in fact, is one of the hardest spiritual disciplines to accomplish. The Book of Hebrews says it clearly, “They failed to enter into my rest—because they would not believe.” It wasn’t a spiritual work that they lacked—but a spiritual rest. And that rest could have easily been gained through simple trust.”¹¹

Foret essentially says to stop striving in order to enter into God’s rest, and he cites Hebrews 4 as biblical support of this idea. But look at what the author of Hebrews actually says in the fourth chapter: “Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. . . . Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience” (Hebrews 4:1,11, ESV). Once again, the real issue is disobedience!

In the end, many professing Christians have a knee-jerk reaction to obedience and confuse commandment-keeping faith with legalism. Whatever legalism truly is, radical obedience to Christ and holiness are not legalism! Will you be declared “lawless” or “legal” on the Day of Judgment?

Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
As in obeying the voice of the Lord?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
And to heed than the fat of rams.
For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,
And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the Lord,
He also has rejected you from being king. (1 Samuel 15:22-23)

11 Blaise Foret, “4 Signs You Might Be Legalistic,” *Relevant Magazine*, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/practical-faith/4-signs-you-might-be-legalistic#x1QVQ3TMmzD4LiyY.99>