

LEGALISM AND THE LAW OF GOD

By Rabbi Re'uel Dillon

Did Yeshua (Jesus) ever criticize a Pharisee for keeping God's Torah/Law? I think you will find that the answer is no. Yeshua either chastised the Pharisees for breaking God's law (usually through tradition), or for the heart in which it was kept. In fact, in Mattityahu (Matthew) 23:23 He criticizes them for not doing the weightier matters of the Torah. He said that they should be focusing on the weightier matter of Torah while keeping the rest of it!

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and anise and cummin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy, and faith: but these you ought to have done, and not to have left the other undone.”

I could stop right here in relation to the expectations our Lord has to those who are following Him. But, let us search this matter out a little further...Yeshua reinforces the idea of keeping Torah to His disciples in Mattityahu (Matthew) 23:1-3,

“Then Yeshua (Jesus) spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say and do not do.”

What was the real issue at hand? Was it concerning the subject of legalism, or hypocrisy and being disobedient to God's words? Since when was it a negative thing to be too obedient to God? Sounds like this would be a doctrine from Satan himself that teaches it is a negative thing to be exceedingly obedient to God's word. So you Christians out there that say that someone is being “legalistic” for sincerely wanting to walk in obedience to God's word (especially when someone is doing it out of love for God) should be careful about spreading doctrines of demons.

The following passage tell us about the attitude that Yeshua does condemn and which could be described as “legalistic” (in the negative meaning of the word), and the attitude that is commendable among believers;

“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 'I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' "And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his

eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." - Luke 18:9-14

We see in this last scripture that "legalism" in its negative sense is trusting in ones self for righteousness, which usually leads to despising others. Legalism, in many cases is really not about what you are doing, but why you are doing it. When it comes down to it...it's a heart issue. The very next parable Yeshua (Jesus) seems to be teaching something totally opposite from the "saved by grace through faith" doctrine that we hear in many churches today.

"Now a certain ruler asked Him, saying "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" So Yeshua (Jesus) said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. "You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Honor your father and your mother.'" And he said, "All these things I have kept from my youth." So when Yeshua heard these things, He said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when he heard this, he became very sorrowful, for he was very rich." - Luke 18:18-23

We see here that when Yshua was asked what was necessary to enter into eternal life, He responds by saying, "You know the commandments...", and then he fires off a few of them. That kind of sounds legalistic doesn't it? But, when the ruler proclaims he has kept the commandments, Yeshua said that He lacked one thing, and that he needed to go and give his wealth to the poor. Wow, so it sounds like not only does this ruler have to keep God's law, but he needs to give all of his belongings to the poor to inherit eternal life! Are the words of Messiah true or not? Make no mistake about it, if I where to teach this in many churches today I would be accused by Christians across the board of being legalistic (in a bad sense), being in bondage, that I was lost, and that I have fallen from grace!

The subject in this last scripture was how to inherit eternal life, and Yeshua did not give the rich man a statement of faith to believe in. Yeshua's response was, "You know the commandments", "...sell all that you have and give to the poor", and "come follow me". These were all actions, or works. I thought we are saved by faith alone? What is happening here?

What we have here is a paradox. It seems confusing on the surface, but when we dig a little deeper we find something different than what we originally observed. What was Yeshua really saying? Yeshua was testing this man's heart and faith. First of all, if you truly love God you will seek to walk in His commandments when you are aware of them. But, Yeshua knew that there was something else that was keeping

this man's heart away from God. It was his riches! It was not necessarily that this man had to give up all of his riches to inherit eternal life. But, it was the one thing that was keeping him from an intimate relationship with the Father. His riches had become an idol to him. The point is; our actions reveal if we truly have faith. For, "faith without works is dead" (Ya'akov/James 2:26).

And, not just any actions will due. Only the actions called for in God's Word reveal a true godly faith. Every organization that claims faith in God has some type of rules and observances that characterize their life. And, in the sense that they insist on acting upon certain principles, laws, and guidelines, they too are legalistic. But, if this is the case and everybody has rules, than it seems logical that the principles, laws, and guidelines that a person whom is seeking to have a healthy relationship with God should be the ones found in the Bible (2Timothy 3:16). In fact, the only individual that couldn't be described as being "legalistic" would be the one that absolutely has no morals whatsoever. Sadly, many times some in Christianity actually feel more comfortable with amoral individuals than they do about those whom insist on living a highly obedient and Torah pursuant life unto God. This type of attitude quickly reveals the spirit leading them...and it is not the one whom writes God's Torah (Law) on one's heart.

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be tangled again with the yoke of bondage." - Galatians 5:1

What is true bondage in the sense of the sinful term; "legalism"? This is a term that many throw around in Christian circles. It is definitely a term that has a negative connotation in Christianity. Many times the term will be used to describe someone who refuses to compromise when comes to obedience to God. The term is generally used to describe what is perceived as carnal behavior in the context of commandment keeping. I believe most Christians really don't understand the term. The way it should be understood, if it is to be understood in a negative way, is in the context of self-righteousness, or self-sufficiency. For example, the illustration of one building a ladder of good works to reach Heaven, and there are people like that out there.

A fruit of true negative legalism is despising your brother or others for their sin because you think that you are so righteous, or because your trust is lacking when it comes to the sufficiency of Yeshua's sacrifice. The proper response when you see your brother sinning is compassion. Compassion can manifest itself in several ways. If you are being compassionate you may warn your brother, you may reach out and help remove the stumbling block from your brother's path, or you may suffer for your brother's sin taking the burden upon yourself. There are many other ways to be compassionate, but they all boil down to a heart that is full of love for your brother. Out of love a father will warn his child not to run out into the middle of the street, lest he get hit by a car. And, if the child's friend warns him of the same thing, hopefully the friend will not be called a "legalist" for doing so. For the child's friend

simply cares about him, and has knowledge of the consequences. Similarly, if I warn someone about breaking God's laws, it is because I love them. Although, your brother may not see your love, patience is a must when you reach out in love while being misunderstood. I have been learning this for the last several years, and still have much room for improvement. What is important is that you, and God know that you are acting out of love...not self-righteousness.

Walking in God's law/Torah is not "legalism". Holiness and obedience is not "legalism". But, Satan would love for the Church to think the opposite. The prophet Isaiah issued a warning for men who called that what is good, to be evil, and that what is evil, to be good.

"Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!"
- Yeshaiyahu / Isaiah 5:20

This prophet walked in the Father's Torah (first five books of Bible). Surprisingly enough, today many Christians would describe walking in Torah (God's law) as a carnal and negative behavior...not becoming of a Christian. Imagine that! So, who should we believe? Are we a disciple of Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah, or the local anti-nomian pastor?

Only the unregenerate heart of man is legalistic. The yoke of bondage or "legalism" was, and is, the idea that by following the law you are saved and earn God's approval. The yoke of bondage is also the idea of keeping man's tradition when it is contrary to God's Word. So, is following the Law of God "legalism" (in a negative sense)? No! Legalism, in the negative sense (following the law to get into Heaven) really is the wrong motivation for following Torah. The right motivation is that you are Spirit filled and you are driven by love and receive joy and fulfillment from walking in obedience to God. And, that is what loving God looks like.

"By this we know that we love the children of God: when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not heavy." – 1Yochanan (John) 5:2-3

In addition to the Law, the Pharisees had also fashioned many man made rules (as found in the Mishna and Talmud) that surrounded, and at many times trampled the Law of God. These sometimes burdensome rules were often contrary to the Torah's true teaching, and caused a heavy burden on those in bondage to them. That is why Yeshua warned his disciples about the yeast of the Pharisees. And, that was one of the big issues that Yeshua was always chastising the Pharisees for. They would make their tradition, which they thought was God sanctioned, but they ended up transgressing His commandments because of their tradition. The yeast of the Pharisees was the false doctrine, or tradition they put in place to keep from breaking

the Law of God, which consequently in many cases did not work. So, really it is the tradition of man that men refuse to compromise that should be labeled as legalism (in a negative sense), and not the following of God's commandments in the context of a godly faith.

If strongly insisting on walking in the word of God is your definition of legalism, you may indeed call me a flaming legalist in Messiah! One will say, "wow, you are very legalistic". Or, one will gossip to another, "he has fallen into legalism". And, I will say, "If I am legalistic because I have a heart to do exactly what I believe the word of God says to do, so be it...you may call me legalistic". But, I think the more accurate description would be "obedient". And, the person whom has the opposite attitude could be labeled as "disobedient". Something to ponder...

Yet, that same person whom accuses another of being "legalistic" is a hypocrite. Most of these people that will accuse you of being legalistic, are themselves legalistic. I will ask that person, "Do you tithe? Do you take a day off to go to church regularly? Do you read your Bible regularly? Do you refrain from using profane language? Do you pray often? Do you refrain from worshipping other gods, and making idols for yourself? Do you refrain from taking the Lord's name in vain? Do you insist on honoring your mother and father? Do you diligently keep yourself from murdering, committing adultery, stealing, lying, or coveting that which is your neighbor's?" If they insist that these things should be followed on a regular basis, which are all according to God's law/Torah, they, by their own definition are legalistic!!

Most Christians are very legalistic about the traditions of men. For they observe Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and many other days without fail every year. Yet, the word of God has not commanded this. In fact, most of these celebrations have their origin in paganism, which God hates. So, someone will call another legalistic, and accuse him of sin for being faithful to God's word. And, this person rejecting God's word embraces the tradition of man. It is good for the one being accused of legalism to listen to God, and not man. I think Yeshua says it well in Matthew 15:3; "...why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?"

Although, all too often some "Christians" seem to be proud of their so called "freedom" in Messiah to break God's commandments. But is Messiah a minister of sin? Or, is Messiah someone whom frees us to sin? Certainly not! Those whom take such an attitude deny Messiah by their works.

"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? May it never be! We who died to sin, how could we live in it any longer? – Romans 6:1-2

"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." - Mattityahu / Matthew 11:29-30

The Law of God was never intended to be burdensome. On the contrary, He designed it to be a blessing, to vitalize our lives, and to keep us safe.

“Whoever believes that Yeshua is the Messiah is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves Him who is begotten of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.” - 1 Yochanan / John 5:1-3

How do we know when we are loving the children of God? This last scripture says it is when we are keeping His commandments. And, it also says, "His commandments are not burdensome". A pastor by the name of Ron Mehl writes, "Have you ever heard God's commandments described as a love letter, a tender heartfelt message from the very hand of God? Perhaps not. Yet I am convinced it is one of the most powerful expressions of God's love in all of Scripture. And, you don't need to read between the lines! It's all there. He doesn't leave anything out. These commandments are all-encompassing, touching virtually every part of our lives. They are parameters to live by, the truths He knows are going to provide blessing and strength, a future and a hope.

And, if I miss the real message of God's commandments, I've missed a great deal. In fact, I've missed the very heart of God. Some people, of course, imagine it to be the exact opposite. They don't hear love in these statements at all. What do they hear? They hear the clank of chains and the rattle of padlocks. They hear God saying, "You mess with Me, you step out of bounds, and I'll fry you like a bug landing on a transformer."

All of this, of course, plays right into Satan's master plan, the one he's had from the beginning. (Why change it if still works?) God is a prude. God is a killjoy. God is a harsh old grandfather with a long gray beard and bushy eyebrows who doesn't want anyone to have any fun, ever. No, it's not a very original line of reasoning. The enemy began it with Eve back at the dawn of creation when he said, Has God really forbidden you this lovely fruit? Oh my. What a pity. What a shame. He knows that if you ever tasted from this tree, you'd be like a god. Nothing could hold you back. You think the Garden of Eden is nice now? You ain't seen nothin! God wants to keep you from the tang and sweetness of life. True freedom means freedom from confining restrictions such as these.”

Ron finishes by saying, “Is Satan right? Are God's commandments harsh and negative, narrow and legalistic, cold and confining? Could there be a brighter, warmer, more passionate side to this familiar portion of Scripture we may have missed through the years?”

The minister, Dan J. Love writes; "There is NO difference between the Commandments and The Laws of God given through Moses or the prophets, and the Commandments given by God through Christ and His Apostles . . . except in as much as the difference is in the 'Misunderstanding' of God's Laws by natural minded men (both Jew and Greek). The natural minded man cannot understand the Spiritual nature of God, or of True Believers, and is therefore Legalistic by nature. As such, the natural man sees all men as he sees himself, and judges the actions of others, including God, with a legalistic perspective. Therefore, the natural man will be the first to condemn the true children of God, and those that follow the Old (First) Testament as being Legalistic. That natural minded men seek either 'Free Salvation' (New Testament Legalism) or 'Earned Salvation' (Old Testament Legalism).

New Testament Legalism comes from the interpretation of Spiritual truths as given by Christ and the Apostles as Magic Rules of Salvation. This comes from a lack of Spiritual understanding, and the desire to obtain eternal life without Works of Faith through Selfless Acts of Love. This is a 'Free Hand-out' or 'Get Something for Nothing' mind set. This is further complicated by half truths such as, "Once Saved Always Saved", and deceptions such as, "All You Have To Do Is Believe, And God Does All The Rest"; although these 'Deceptions' are technically correct, the problem with these concepts is that legalist don't understand what it means "To Believe". They simply do not know God, and are (therefore) not known by God (no intimate relationship with God). Their faith is not True Faith, but a Desire to receive without giving. There is no True Love in the relationship, and (therefore) no resultant Works of Faith (Obedience through Love).

Old Testament Legalism comes from the interpretation of The Laws of God as given by Moses, and Prophets as Magic Rules of Salvation. This, also, comes from a lack of Spiritual understanding, and the desire to earn one's way into eternal life through Works of faith in one's self. Again, there is no intimate relationship with God. The faith is not in God, but in one's ability to follow The Rules through one's own Works (efforts). The reality is that there is No Difference between the Old Testament Laws or Commandments, and the New Testament Commandments."

Dan finishes by saying, "In actuality they are both intimate "Marriage Vows of Love" exchanged between God and those that "Know and are Known by The Eternal". . . . When you are "In Love" with The Eternal "Obedience is a Spiritual Desire from the Heart". . . . "An Act of Love" !"

Does God's character ever change? Does God change His mind about what is sin, or break His promises? All of God's laws are spiritual and a reflection of His character, and His character is the same yesterday, today, and forever"

"Yeshua The Messiah is the same yesterday, today, and forever." - Hebrews 13:8

“For we know that the law is spiritual” - Romans 7:14

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” – Mattityahu (Matthew) 5:17-19

“And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail.” - Luke 16:17

There is something that should be seen in this last two scriptures. Yeshua said that not even a smidge of God's law would be un-relevant until heaven and earth passed away. And, until heaven and earth passes away, all will not be fulfilled. When does the bible say heaven and earth will pass away? Read Revelation chapter 20 and realize that this chapter concludes Messiah's thousand-year reign on the old Earth. The very next verse in Chapter 21:1 of the book of Revelation says this;

“Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea.”

So, you couldn't even consider God's law as irrelevant until after the millennial reign, and not even then because it reveals the very character of God. And, remember the definition of sin is the transgression of the law of God. So, are we willfully ignorant of sin? Or, is it o.k. for a Christian to sin in certain areas of their life? And, should we continue in it once we have knowledge of it?

“If you love Me, keep My commandments.” – Yochanan / John 14:15

“He who has My commandments and keeps them, its is he who loves Me . And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.” - Yochanan / John 14:21

“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. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.” - Yochanan / John 15:10-11

“Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. (4) He who says, I know Him, and does not keep His commandments, is a liar , and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought

himself also to walk just as He walked. Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning.”

- 1 Yochanan / John 2:3-7

Why would you ignore these last few scriptures? The Bible is so clear! Satan only wants to confuse you because He knows that walking in God's laws will make you more useful for His Kingdom! God wants us to be holy as He is holy, and we can do this through His Holy Spirit, not of our selves!

“but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, Be holy, for I am holy.” - 1Kefa / Peter 1:15

We are like a glove. By itself the glove is worthless and can do nothing of itself. But, if we put our hand in the glove it does exactly what we want. It moves in the direction that we want it to go and it flexes upon command from our hand. God is the hand in us through His Holy Spirit. If you command that glove to do something apart from a controlling hand, it does nothing that is according to your will. But, once it is filled with a hand it can do what so ever the hand makes it do. If the glove resists, or becomes too stiff, the hand will be quenched and will not be able to perform the desired function. This is the same relationship between the Holy Spirit and us regarding God's law, and will. So, be a flexible glove!

“Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him . And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.”

- 1 Yochanan / John 4:24

Yeshua's commandments are the very same as the Fathers commandments. Sometimes we start separating the Father, and the Son when we think about the commandments. But, Yeshua is the Key to understanding the commandments, what they stand for, and why God wants us to follow them. Notice that in Yochanan / John 15:11, Yeshua says that He tells us these things so our joy may be full. I tell you the truth; you cannot have full joy, and blessing, spiritually or physically unless you are walking in God's laws.

“But He answered and said, "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God ." – Mattityahu / Matthew 4:4

This last scripture says that man shall live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Could this possibly mean that we are to live our lives according to the older testament too? In fact, the older testament was the only word of God written down at the time.

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine for reproof, for correction in righteousness.” - 2Timothy 3:16

Let' take a look at this last verse carefully. What scripture is profitable for doctrine, reproof, and correction in righteousness? It says All scripture . Understand that at this time the New Testament scripture was not written down on paper or finished. The only established scripture they had at the time was the TaNaKh (Torah, prophets, and writings)...the books of the older testament. Their Bible was Beresheet (Genesis) through Malachi, of which most all scriptural quotes were derived from in the Newer Testament.

So, This last verse is definitely talking about the Older Testament scripture, commands, ordinances, feasts, Sabbaths etc. Of course, this last scripture was looking forward to the New Covenant scriptures as well. What I want you to see is that Older Testament is just as good for doctrine, and correction in righteousness as the Newer Testament!

“The Lord of hosts, Him you shall hallow; Let Him be your dread. He will be a sanctuary, but a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, as a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble; they shall fall and be broken, be snared and taken. Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples.” – Yeshaiyahu / Isaiah 8:13-16

There are two things I want to point out in this last scripture. First of all this is a Messianic prophesy about Yeshua. Second, there is a special relationship between His disciples and following God's laws.

Tehillim / Psalms 19:7-11

“The law of the Lord is perfect , converting the soul ;
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple ;
The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart ;
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes ;
The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, Yea than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
Moreover by them Your servant is warned,
And in keeping them there is great reward.”

All God's laws are awesome, and you can't go wrong by following any of them! Does this sound like the advice that Satan would give you? No, but it would be the advice that the Holy Spirit would give you.

“Therefore the Law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.”
- Romans 7:12

“You are near, O Lord, And all Your commandments are truth. Concerning Your testimonies, I have known of old that You have founded them forever.”

- Tehillim / Psalms 119:151-152

“I delight to do Your will, O my God, And Your law is within my heart.”

- Tehillim / Psalms 40:8

“Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.” - Romans 3:31

This last scripture speaks volumes. But, we see that Paul definitely did not teach the law was nullified through faith.

“For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.” - Romans 7:22

“...So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God.” - Romans 7:25

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all.” – Kohelet / Ecclesiastes 12:13

“And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and sit down to eat’? But will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’ - Luke 17:7-10

So, we see that we are not loved any more by God when we keep His commandments. Walking in His commands is simply our duty, and He expects us to be obedient. If we follow God's Law, it should be because we love Him, want to be more like Him, and because He has written His law on our hearts, which were once stone. And, if you do this, don't be ashamed if someone maliciously calls you “legalistic”.