

How to avoid both legalism and antinomianism

A. Definition: Legalism: Placing more emphasis on obeying laws than God does.

1. Questions of emphasis are by nature difficult to pin down conclusively.  
(Examples from other areas of life: "He emphasizes \_\_\_\_\_ too much.") exercise, saving \$, prep. for terrorist attack, politics, music, work, studies, friendships, sports, health food, Bible study, personal appearance, etc.)
2. So deciding what is a right emphasis requires some wisdom, maturity.

B. Legalism finds various expressions:

1. Making obedience to God a necessary part of saving faith (denying justification by faith alone)  
We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Gal 2:16) . → neglecting God's grace in justification: Eph. 2:8-9
2. Adding to the moral or doctrinal requirements of Scripture, and thus becoming stricter than Scripture.
  - a. As in saying that Christians still have to follow Mosaic holidays, food laws, circumcision):
  - b. Scripture: You observe days and months and seasons and years! <sup>11</sup> I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. (Galatians 4:10-11)  
And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! (Mark 7:9; read Mark 7:9-12 )  
But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. <sup>4</sup> Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—<sup>5</sup> to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. (Galatians 2:3-5 )
  - c. Remember an important principle from the sufficiency of Scripture → Nothing is required of everyone that is not required by Scripture, and nothing is prohibited for everyone that is not prohibited by Scripture.  
All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
  - d. Last generation: no alcohol, playing cards, dancing, even movies. Today? I think SBC is largely free of this, but in some churches: organic food, no SUVs, supporting a certain political view, dressing a certain way for church, Other examples today: cushionites and anti-cushionites (see Bryan Chapell, Holiness by Grace, p. 118), worship music preferences, schooling choices. Other? 1-fer, 2-fers
3. Attitude: Having a judgmental attitude toward others. (rather than gracious, forgiving attitude)
  - a. Habitually having a critical spirit.
  - b. Habitually projecting negative judgments, criticisms, accusations, condemnations toward others.  
Many people can sense this even if you don't say a word.
  - c. Rarely if ever giving affirmations, encouragement, compliments. (so few people meet your standards!)
  - d. When you are around legalistic persons, they tend to make you feel guilty, inferior, not good enough.
  - e. Excluding people from fellowship over minor things:  
Like holidays, what you can eat: (Rom. 14:1-23)
  - f. Never being able to find a church that meets your standards
4. Attitude: pride. "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6 )
  - a. Legalism tends to make its proponents proud, self-righteous (they are good at justifying to themselves everything they do). Not recognizing own spiritual neediness.
  - b. Never admitting that you are wrong.
  - c. Never really submitting to legitimate authority. Unwilling to be a team player.  
(Certain professor on campaign against Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, where I taught) - always distorted his representation of what was taught.  
-- this opponent always had to prove himself right  
Or on another matter, when vote in ETS went "wrong" way, began to speak about "formerly ETS"
  - d. This is not James 3: But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. <sup>18</sup> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:17-18 )
  - e. Seldom or never having a truly repentant, contrite heart.  
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psa 51:17 )
  - f. Depending on your own strength apart from the Holy Spirit to make you righteous: Rom. 8:13
  - g. But sometimes the opposite happens: some legalistic people are self-condemning, always feeling like spiritual failures, like they are never doing enough (because they are depending on their own purity to make them right with God.  
(1) Do you always having a negative, discouraged, downcast view of yourself rather than a positive, thankful to God, hopeful view?

(2) For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (Rom 12:3)

5. Majoring on minor things:

a. Always being picky, judgmental about minor things that may even be wrong but are none of your business, should be overlooked

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? <sup>4</sup> Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?

<sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:3-5)

b. Being overly-scrupulous in tiny details of obedience while missing things that have much larger consequences  
"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! (Mat 23:23-24)

c. Lacking a sense of proportion: Failing to distinguish between major and minor matters in doctrine or conduct, and thus failing to let love cover "a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8)

(for putting Hab. instead of Hag. in a footnote)

6. Emphasizing outward conduct and appearance (clothing, beauty) but neglecting inward heart attitudes

a. Scripture: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. (Mat 23:25; also see 1 Pet. 3:3-4; 1 Sam. 16:7)

b. Examples: ?

7. Judging the Christian maturity or commitment of others only on the things we are good at

- not understanding the complexity or the difficulty of another person's life as God understands it

8. Withholding forgiveness, holding grudges

a. Thinking that you need to personally guarantee that another person "suffers" enough for the wrong he or she has done to you. (rather than leaving to God: Rom 12:19); also Matt. 6:12

b. Thinking that you have to convict others of sin rather than praying, trusting Holy Spirit

9. Inwardly hoping that you will be shown to be more righteous, more holy, more doctrinally sound than everybody else (and that others will slip up).

Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. (Phil. 2:3)

10. Failing to teach about legalism (for fear of appearing antinomian!)

11. Regularly scowling, not smiling at people. ☹

C. Definition: Antinomianism (also sometimes called "lawlessness" or "license" – license to sin! – or "licentiousness"): Putting less emphasis on obeying laws than God does.

anti = against. *nomos* (Greek) = "law"

1. Thinking that sin doesn't matter, esp. for a forgiven Christian.

2. Neglecting joys and blessings of obedience (see Dec 18 2011 class outline)

Thinking that God's blessings on your life do not depend at all on your obedience.

Exx. of professing Christians who gradually strayed, thought nothing was going to go wrong

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, <sup>20</sup> let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:19-20)

3. Neglecting the consequences of sin in a Christian's life (see Dec 11 2011 class outline)

a. Minimizing the horribly destructive consequences of willful, repeated sin in the life of a believer (or unbeliever)

4. Ignoring or not recognizing God's discipline when it comes

5. Ignoring a guilty conscience. Ignoring warnings and counsel from wise friends.

6. Bristling if anybody tries to talk to you about: movies, speech, money, honesty, work habits

7. Failing to teach about or talk about the importance of obedience to God, of repentance. (for fear of appearing legalistic)

Q: What about this statement: "God won't love you any more or less, no matter what you do."

In one sense, that is true (his love is infinite and eternal and free, for "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us," Rom 5:8). But in other senses the expressions of his love, the manifestations of his love in our lives, are given or withheld depending on our obedience or disobedience. The statement can be misleading, not helpful.

Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14:23)

D. Remember that knowing when something is legalism or antinomianism is not always clear. Sometimes it requires mature judgment, wisdom, because it is sometimes a matter of emphasis. Might vary by situation.

- 3 year old needs more rules than 30 year old

- young Christians, esp. from non-Christian patterns of life, might need very explicit direction