

Legalism or Illegalism  
3-2-14

In Ephesians 5:6, the Apostle Paul warned us of the danger of "*Empty Words*" (*Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience*). Empty Words are meaningless terms that convey ideas that do not exist or apply by making up words to describe them. Their intention is usually to suggest a negative condition that cannot be challenged in order to change the way we think about an idea. Typically, they are words NOT in the Bible.

Here are some examples of "Empty Words"

Homophobic  
Anti  
Liberal/Conservative  
Cult  
Legalist

Our focus is on the last word: Legalism. What is Legalism? Literally, it refers to an adherence, or the principle of strict adherence, to law. Subjectively, many will say that it is the strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code. In usage, it usually means someone who believes that the Bible is a legal guide that requires obedience.

Here are some examples of its usage:

*If you teach that baptism is for the remission of sins, you are a legalist<sup>1</sup>*  
*If you teach Jesus' law on marriage, divorce and remarriage, you are a legalist<sup>2</sup>*  
*If you teach that we must have authority to serve God acceptably, you are a legalist<sup>3</sup>*

To this end, some suggest that Jesus accused the Pharisees of Legalism in Matthew 23, or that Paul warned against legalism in 2 Corinthians 3:6. To many, Legalism is the unforgiveable sin.

However, this is simply not the truth. If we read what Jesus said about the Pharisees in Matthew 23, their sin was that they did NOT strictly obey Law. In fact, Jesus condemned their *lawlessness*, which is another word for *Illegalism*. As well, Paul insisted on legal obedience to the Law of Christ; when he stated one could not obey the law, the "Law" he referred to was Mosaic, not the law of Christ (Romans 8:1-2; Galatians 6:1-2). In fact, Paul taught a Covenant relationship which was the Law of Christ AND Grace of Christ (A covenant is a law – Jeremiah 31:33 and a covenant is a promise – Hebrews 8:6)

In fact, Jesus NEVER rebuked anyone for strict interpretation of the Law. Why? Jesus was a "Legalist" in every meaning of the word.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.faithfacts.org/world-religions-and-theology/church-of-christ#baptism>

<sup>2</sup> <http://godsgraceforthe divorcedandremarried.blogspot.com/2012/02/bad-fruit-of-depression-through-mdr.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cultwatch.com/legalism.html>

*"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." Matthew 5:19*

Paul too was a Legalist

*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? 1 Cor 6:9a*

*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; Philipians 2:12b*

John was a Legalist

*"He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar I John 2:4*

*"Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God" I Jn 3:10*

*"Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God." II Jn 9*

James was a Legalist

*For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. James 2*

What we are really talking about then is the error of Illegalism. Jesus condemned making up laws; such is illegalism. Jesus condemned not keeping God's law. This too is Illegalism – coming short. People who accuse others of "legalism" are often guilty of "Illegalism". God never condemned being lawful; God condemned lawlessness.

**Legalism - an empty word that can cost you your salvation!**