



### What does it mean to be “legalistic”?

Someone recently asked me this question. Maybe you’ve heard the term as well.

I would define “legalistic” as “An inflexible and extreme emphasis on the keeping of rules.”

A great example would be the religious group in Jesus’ day known as the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a group of Jews so afraid they might break one of God’s rules (like keeping the Sabbath holy, for example) that they created all sorts of extra rules designed to prevent them from even coming close to breaking one of the rules God had given.

If you’ve read the accounts of Jesus’ life in any of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John) you know that it was the Pharisee group who really didn’t like Jesus. He was constantly breaking the rules they (not God!) had set and were obsessed with. On the flip side, Jesus spent more time chewing out the Pharisees for their legalism than He did any other group.

In my experience, people who tend to be legalistic - obsessed with doing things a very specific way - often suffer from the wrong idea about God. They tend to have what I refer to as “the Muslim view of God.” (That ought to be sufficient motivation to get rid of any legalistic tendencies you may possess!)

The Bible presents God as One who has a Father-child relationship with us human beings. He *unconditionally* loves us, because He gave us life! It strikes me that Islam presents God as one who has more of a Master-Slave relationship with us. He is viewed as having no inherent love for people, but is only pleased with them when they do exactly as He tells them.

A legalistic person often develops an extreme obsession with rules, because they feel the only way God will like them or treat them favorably is if they *always* do *exactly* what He wants. That’s not only a horrible way to live, it’s also not true! Martin Luther had that kind of view of God until he discovered it wasn’t a biblical view. Discovering that God deals with us out of love and grace (giving good things we don’t deserve) was life-changing for Luther.

Our motivation to keep God’s rules should not be to earn something from Him. God gives us good things because He loves us, not because we’ve earned them. He gives good things because *He* is good, not because *we’ve* been good. Forgiveness and eternal life are prime examples:

John 3:16 says this: “For God so *loved* the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever *believes in* Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”

John 3:16 doesn’t read this way: “For God so *rules* the world that He gave His only Son that whoever *obeys His commands perfectly every time* will be rewarded with eternal life.”

Of course, this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t attempt to do what God tells us! God gives us rules for the same reason a loving parent gives a child rules: He knows that keeping them will result in the best life. Not keeping them will result in hurt! It’s just that our motivation for keeping His rules should NOT be to earn His favor, but rather should be out of trust that because He loves us *already*, He always has our best interest in mind.

Thanks for asking,  
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