

Legalism vs. Obedience

By Aaron Kelso

Introduction

When it comes to the terms and concepts behind *legalism* and *obedience*, it can be difficult at times to distinguish between the two. Often, they're words used interchangeably when at their core they're fundamentally different. *Legalism* is defined as, "**excessive adherence to** law or formula" (www.dictionary.com), whereas *obedience* is defined as, "**compliance with** an order, request, or law or submission to another's authority" (www.dictionary.com). I think we can all agree there's a difference between "excessive adherence to" a law and "compliance with" another's authority. The chief end of *legalism* is to fulfill the literal law, but the chief end of *obedience* is to fulfill the law of a lawgiver. When it comes to our relationship with God and following the commands of Scripture it's of the upmost importance that we understand the difference—that we practice *obedience*, not *legalism*.

Lesson

For whatever reason humanity tends to prefer legalism over obedience. (I believe it has something to do with the false sense of security and control we sometimes feel in legalism). It's one of the most common issues Jesus confronted in His earthly ministry. You see, by the time Jesus started preaching, the Jewish people had taken a full 180 in their understanding of how a relationship with God was formed and maintained. In the past, their ancestors had taken the commands of God very loosely. They believed in the existence and power of their God, but they didn't take the law seriously. They mixed the decrees of God with cultural norms and the teachings of other religions in the area. This led to sin, which led to separation, which led to judgment in the form of two exiles—two moments where God demolished their cultures for not taking His law seriously. So, upon their return from exile, the Jewish

people (having realized their need to obey God), for the first time since Moses and their arrival to the promised land, began to seek to be as faithful as possible.

However, the fear of another exile (or some equal punishment) pushed many beyond *obedience* to *legalism*. They didn't want to be live like their parents and grandparents, so they sought to do the exact opposite. It had been over five hundred years since the first exiles returned to Israel from the last exile by the time Jesus was born. Five hundred years of growing, perpetual legalism. So, when Jesus shows up and speaks of the supremacy of *obedience* in a cultural of *legalism* it shouldn't be a surprise that He was met with opposition. *Legalism* had led the religious leaders of His time to believe man is justified before God by both his merit and faith. In the Book of Romans, the Apostle Paul appears to be addressing the same belief in some of the early churches by reminding them,

"If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.' Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness" (4:2-5, ESV).

Legalism teaches that justification (being made worthy of relationship with God) is achieved by man's merit and strict adherence to the law, whereas *obedience* teaches that justification is gifted by God through faith and shown through merit and adherence to the law.

In His famous declaration, *the Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus confronts many common misconceptions about faith as well as some of the legalism that was negatively affecting the Jewish peoples' relationship of God. He often uses the phrase, "*You have heard that it was said* (fill in the blank)... *but I say...*" Reading Scripture, through legalism lens, brought them to the conclusion that when God had command such things as, "*You shall not murder,*" He meant only that you shouldn't kill

someone. Anything short of the word for word translation, was often deemed permissible if it didn't contradict another law. God's commands were meant to set up guidelines for *obedience*, not *legalism*. But being that they had chosen a legalistic theology, they felt the need to extend the 613 laws of the Old Testament with additional works (i.e. Halakha, Babylonian Talmud, etc.). I guess there just wasn't enough fine print for their legal minds.

Either way, Jesus clearly taught strict *obedience* in place of *legalism*—that man is justified by faith which should naturally lead to *obedience*. Paul said it perfectly when he wrote, "Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:1-2, ESV). There's a difference between *legalism* and *obedience*.

Application

Read Luke 18:9-14. What does Jesus' illustration teach about these two terms and concepts?

Works Cited

Holy Bible: English Standard Version. Crossway, 2020.

“Legalism.” *Dictionary.com*, Random House, www.dictionary.com/browse/legalism?s=t.

“Obedience.” *Dictionary.com*, Random House, www.dictionary.com/browse/obedience?s=t.