

**Walking the Thin Line**  
**Liberty versus Legalism in the Local Church**  
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**Introduction**

We know from Scripture that we are to get along with one another. **UNITY** in the body is a serious issue to the Lord. In fact, many passages are devoted to this issue.

Ephesians 4:2–3—we are to relate to one another “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, *being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*”

Romans 12:16—“Be of the *same mind* toward one another.”

Philippians 2:2—“Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, *united in spirit, intent on one purpose.*”

In fact, this issue of unity is so important that Paul wrote to the Corinthians and stated his concern for them by saying, “I am afraid that perhaps when I come...there may be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances” (2 Cor. 12:20).

John MacArthur, when preaching on this passage, terms this list as “sins of personal conflict that destroy the church’s unity, which Paul wanted preserved at all costs” (Eph. 4:3, 13; cf. John 17:21; 1 Cor. 1:10).

One of the greatest concerns we as pastors and elders should have, therefore, is that *unity be maintained in the body of Christ*. Disunity is destructive!

Unfortunately, the habit of many in the church universal and local is to *judge* other believers based on their own convictions and views of the Christian life. People develop these strong convictions and live by them. The problem, though, is that they do more than just live by these heartfelt guidelines themselves; *they also expect everyone else to live by the same convictions*. If someone doesn’t hold the same view on a subject, then that individual is *judged* at least to be less spiritual, or at worst to be in *open rebellion* against God.

The Scriptures have a lot to say about judging; some samples:

Matthew 7:1–2—“Do not judge lest you be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.” I think a case can be made that one of the major themes of our Savior’s ministry was to confront the errors of judging.

James 4:11–12—“Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother, speaks against the law, and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?”

1 Corinthians 4:5–6—“Therefore do not go on *passing judgment* before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in us you might learn *not to exceed what is written*, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.”

The term commonly used to describe this judgmental tendency is **LEGALISM**. From the earliest days of the church, legalism has thrown Christians off course and has diverted them all over the place from living a Christ-centered life. As Paul wrote, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins.”

When used in connection with justification, “legalism” usually means *adding good works* to God’s grace to contribute somehow to a person’s justification. But when used in connection with sanctification, the term usually has something to do with *manmade laws* or *traditions* that are added to the Bible.

The mistakes Christians can make are twofold:

1. Christians can confuse their own ongoing participation in the process of sanctification (1 Tim. 4:7) with God’s finished work in justification. In other words, Christians can fall into the trap of believing that their good works or godly practices contribute to their justification.
2. When it comes to sanctification, Christians can err by adding their own manmade rules and traditions to the ethical teachings of Scripture. Thus, people can fall into the trap of believing that if they keep those rules that “go beyond what is written,” then they will have *more assurance* that *God loves them*, and quite often they believe that they are more *spiritual* than other Christians.

### **Definition**

C.J. Mahaney says, “Legalism is seeking to achieve forgiveness from God and acceptance by God through obedience to God” (*The Cross Centered Life*, p. 25).

Dave Swavely offers a helpful definition of legalism based on 1 Corinthians 4:6: “Legalism, in regard to Christian morality, is simply creating moral standards beyond what the Scripture has revealed” (*Who Are You to Judge?* p. 55).

“Legalism is where professing Christians seek to please God based on their own performance in justification/sanctification by creating their own moral standards that are *not* revealed in Scripture and then place those standards on a par with the commands and principles of Scripture.”

What kinds of issues do legalists adopt to gauge spirituality? There are many—more than you may think. In fact, we deal with these issues on a daily basis. We call them the “gray areas” of life. By that, we mean that the Bible doesn’t explicitly say that various opinions in these categories are either *right* or *wrong*.

Here’s a brief list of some of the categories involved:

- **Entertainment**—movies, television, cards, pool, paintball, computer games, etc. “R-rated movies are out for a believer.”
- **External Personal Appearance**—clothes, makeup, jewelry, hair, etc.
- **Music**—style, etc. (What is appropriate in church?)
- **Parenting**—“If you feed your baby ‘on demand,’ you’re a bad parent.”
- **Dating**
- **Education of Children**—homeschool, private school, public school
- **Patronization of Businesses**—shopping, Disneyland, long-distance providers, restaurants, etc.
- **Birth Control**—“It robs God of His sovereignty and rebelliously refuses His blessings.”
- **Language**
- **Bible Translations**
- **Giving**—Is it tithing or freewill giving?
- **Politics**—parties, activism
- **Medical Issues**—life support, transfusions, medications
- **Halloween**
- **Santa Claus**
- **Owning Material Goods**—“There is no way someone can drive a car that expensive and be a godly man.”
- **Food**
- **Separation**
- **Sunday Activities**—“It’s wrong to watch a football game on the Lord’s Day.”
- **“Mixed” Swimming**
- **Environmental Issues**
- **Debt/Credit**
- **Drinking Wine, Dancing, Smoking**—“Smoking is a sin because it destroys the temple of God.”
- **Tattoos**
- **Membership**—“He’s a member of our church, but I know he’s not a Christian.”

You could also call the legalistic system that develops over such topics *Pharisaism*.

## History

The Pharisees were the original legalists.

*Pharisee* means “separated one,” and members of this sect diligently tried to live up to their name. Their “spirituality” was entirely *external*, consisting of the pursuit of meticulous observance of a multitude of religious rituals and taboos, most of which they and various other religious leaders had devised over the previous several centuries as supplements to the Law of Moses. These were known collectively as “the tradition of the elders,” concerning which Jesus gave the Pharisees one of His strongest rebukes, charging them with “teaching as doctrines the precepts of men” (Matt. 15:2–9).

Of all the degrading titles that Jesus used to describe the Pharisees, none was more devastating than referring to them as “leaven.” He told his disciples, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (Luke 12:1).

## The Problem

Why do people tend toward legalism?

Because they fear that if God’s principles are not structured with rules, men will ignore what God said and run wildly into sin. In other words, the rules are an attempt to force people to do what is right.

The key problem, then, is *unbelief*—legalists do not believe in the *power* of the Holy Spirit to direct men into right living.

Legalists’ mantra: “We must interpret God’s principles for them and then force them to obey for their own good.”

Partly, the problem is:

- It’s easy to measure the keeping of rules.
- Legalism is the easy way out.
- A system of rules does not provide decision-making opportunities and experiences.

## The Central Focus

Legalism focuses NOT on the legitimate needs of an individual, but on the institution (church, school, “family reputation,” etc.). It must *force* compliance and conformity in order to protect the institution.

How can institutionalized legalism affect our families?

Pastor's kids certainly are expected by the church to act rightly, but what is right?

They must be encouraged to live by godly principles and allowed to make *personal choices*. Bottom line: (1) *Model the gospel*. (2) *Teach them the gospel* in the milieu of life (Deut. 6). (3) *Love them dearly*; be willing to lay down your life for each one according to his or her individual bent.

### **The Right Responses**

- Teach that God makes it clear that some things are wrong.
- Admit that we have questions about many issues.
- Preach the “whole counsel of God”
- Be honest with one another, and especially with our young people.
- Don't overestimate your importance.
- Don't micromanage your people or your staff.
- Don't be threatened by those who disagree.
- Do be patient with people's sanctification.
- Do aim your preaching at the heart.
- Do teach Romans 14 to your congregation.

Paul lays down some timeless principles that we can learn from in Romans 14; these principles apply to gray areas or controversial issues among Christians.

**THE PRINCIPLE OF ACCEPTANCE** (Rom. 14:1–4)

**THE PRINCIPLE OF PERSONAL CONVICTION** (Rom. 14:5)

**THE PRINCIPLE OF EDIFICATION** (Rom. 14:13–21)

**THE PRINCIPLE OF CONSCIENCE** (Rom. 14:22–23)

Out of these general principles flow some important questions for people to ask when dealing with an issue that is not explicitly addressed in the Bible:

1. **Are you sure that what you are doing is right?** (Rom. 14:5, 14, 22–23)
2. **Is your decision for the Lord?** (Rom. 14:6)
3. **Does your decision enslave you to another master?** (7–9)
4. **Are you going to suffer judgment for your decision?** (10–12)
5. **Can you make your decision without being a stumbling block to your brother or sister in Christ?** (Rom. 14:13, 15, 20–21)

**6. Does your decision bring peace?** (Rom. 14:16–19)

**7. Does it edify your brother?** (Rom. 14:19)

- Do teach on the importance of unity in the body.

Periodically present God’s perspective on unity to your people by teaching from one of the many passages that address it. They need to be reminded that *unity* among believers in a local assembly is important to the Lord.

Ephesians 4:2–3—we are to relate to one another “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, *being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*”

**Helpful Books**

*The Cross Centered Life* by C.J. Mahaney (Multnomah Publishing)

*Who Are You to Judge?* by Dave Swavely (P&R Publishing)