

Reflections on Legalism

Undoubtedly, legalism is an exceptionally virulent spiritual disease. Its particular tenacity lies in its ability to mask its evil origin with a deceptive attractiveness. For morally serious and spiritually sensitive persons, legalism initially presents itself as a reasonable and attractive answer to the human dilemma: conscientious obedience to objective moral laws and religious requirements. Herein, however, lies one of the sources of legalism's perverse hold over human hearts and minds. Legalism is able to encourage the self's nobler impulses and aspirations while at the same time drawing them into a deadly self-deception.

Devotion to clarifying, refining, and arranging moral and religious obligations diverts attention from the underlying claims which define human existence: love of God and love for neighbor. Legalism blunts, dilutes, and inevitably weakens the primal obligation; it is either fragmented into countless rules and regulations, or it is reduced to being only one among numerous equally binding requirements and regulations. The latter are arranged into an overarching system whose particular stipulations, because concrete and specific, become the focus of continual qualification and refinement. Indeed, the religious life itself becomes an unending debate about fine points of interpretation. The result is the thoroughly juridicized life.

In dealing with legalism, two pastoral observations are helpful. First, given the energies legalism invests in maintaining its intellectual and juridical system, and its parasitical need to criticize and blame others, one should be extremely cautious when entering into discussions with

representatives of legalism. Not only are such discussions seldom instructive or edifying, they almost invariably serve to reinforce legalism. Since any attention, however unflattering, tends to fuel legalism's intensity, legalism may best be dealt with through intercessory prayer. Left to its own devices, legalism collapses under its excesses: or, in the absence of opponents, legalists turn on each other. Ultimately, legalism fails because it cannot satisfy the human heart's deep hunger for reconciliation with its Creator.

Second, those who have experienced the evil of legalism are tempted to react against all forms of moral and religious obligations and duties. More precisely, those haunted by the specter of legalism are especially tempted to equate "anti-legalism" with "grace." While this is understandable, it is as spiritually immature and destructive as the legalistic systems to which it reacts. It should be remembered that legalism is ultimately a minimalist ethic and an external religion; legalism always demands less, not more, than covenant love.

The radical claims of covenant love are not rooted in human abilities (e.g., "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," "love one another as I have loved you," "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"); they are reflective of the incalculable and inexhaustible goodness of God shown in Jesus Christ. Covenant love demands more than legalism because the Father is giving and enabling more: He asks no less of us than He gives.

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