

## A Study on Legalism vs. Biblical Holiness

by Dennis Tutor

**Text:** *"If ye love me, keep my commandments" John 14:15*

**Personal Note:** Before we begin our study, please permit me to offer some biblical advice for anyone who wishes to teach on the doctrine of holiness: 1) Love people whether they listen to you or not. John 4:7-8 says, *"...love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 He who does not love does not know God, for God is love..."* We must always hate sin but love the sinner! , 2) Teach with tears in your eyes and not "wooden beams" as you seek to remove the "splinters" from the eyes of others. Humility works much better than spiritual pride or a "holier than thou attitude", 3) *"Judge not lest ye be judged..."* God doesn't require our help in this matter. We must remember that judgment toward others harms us much more than the guilty parties, 4) Do not teach personal convictions as doctrine. If you do not have a solid foundation of New Testament scripture, do not burden others with your personal convictions---obey them yourself, but leave them private, 5) If you obeyed the first four rules, the last one is simple--Do not compromise or dilute New Testament teaching for anyone. Faithfully proclaim God's Word and let others do what they will with the message or the messenger. Galatians 1:10 *"For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ."* We may be successful in persuading others to obey biblical teaching but *"good luck" to anyone attempting to convince God to change his Word to meet our personal approval--be prepared for utter disappointment in this endeavor!*

**Introduction:** Discipline, discipleship, responsibility, self-denial, obedience to biblical principles, all of these are words that fit the lifestyle of a meager few in our modern society. Who among us will walk in biblical integrity against the strong winds of temptation? A few champions from each generation have risen to meet the challenge, but only a few. Vast multitudes of people are hidden within the crowd that follows the path of least resistance. Holiness teaching is not for everyone but there will always be some in each generation who are especially touched as they read God's Word and called to go beyond the minimum requirements that satisfies the masses around them. Like a skilled marksman, they aim for the center of the target instead of the outer perimeter. Jesus stated this fact powerfully in Luke 13:23-27 when he was asked this question, *"Lord, are there few that be saved? And he said unto them, <sup>24</sup>Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. <sup>25</sup>When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are: <sup>26</sup>Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets. <sup>27</sup>But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity."* Jesus is warning that our earthly church has a mixture of wheat and tares--a varying scale of lukewarm to enthusiastic followers of Christ, but heaven will not accept such a crowd. Sadly, many will learn too late that meeting the minimum requirements of their church will not be sufficient to gain entrance into heaven.

2 Timothy 2-4 admonishes and warns every generation to, *"Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season..., For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; 4 And they shall turn away their ears from the truth..."*, We are instructed to faithfully teach (or preach) God's Word in all

seasons. We are currently enduring an extended “*out of season*” period for holiness teaching. It is seldom mentioned in our churches anymore! Those who faithfully teach it are openly scrutinized and called extremists. They are labeled as “*legalist*”, or followers of the doctrine of “*salvation by works*”, or bringing people under the yoke of “*Old Testament bondage*”. Many modern teachers say that personal holiness is no longer relevant--modern Christians have found a new and liberating truth—“*we can live anyway we wish in regards to sin without accountability to God for our actions.*” They teach that God no longer regards unbiblical lifestyles because: modern sin is under the “*umbrella of grace.*” Although God’s grace is unquestionably essential for any of us to be accounted worthy of heaven, it is not to be used as a free license to live in open sin. Do not be deceived—today’s teaching on grace is a modern-day heresy in which sin and sinful lifestyles are permitted to continue within the church without being challenged by the light of biblical truth. As with any heresy, innocent people are in danger of losing their immortal soul because of erroneous teaching that leads innocent people astray from the truth of God’s Word.

First, let us look at the definition of legalism. Webster’s Dictionary defines it as: *the act of being too strict in adherence to a law or code; or, the doctrine of salvation by good works.* As a Pentecostal minister for over thirty years, I have witnessed a lot of legalistic teaching, especially in my early days of the ministry. A few examples are as follows: *men were prohibited from wearing short sleeve shirts to church because it was unholy and exposed too much of their bodies, women were prohibited from wearing any form of jewelry other than their wedding rings and instructed to roll their hair in a tower above their head to make them more holy. I even heard a minister say once that it was wrong to drink sodas from bottles because beer was packaged in bottles (I wondered at the time if he was aware that beer was also packaged in aluminum cans).* One may ask, where is the scriptural foundation for this type of teaching? The truth is--legalistic teaching has no scriptural foundation and therefore can not be defended? Legalistic teaching on someone’s personal convictions should always be subjected to scriptural challenges but personal convictions are not the same thing as true biblical holiness. True biblical holiness has the New Testament as its only foundation. Thereby, we recognize the difference between legalism and holiness.

Holiness teaching must also teach the empowerment of the Holy Ghost as the primary means of victory over sin. Human effort alone will never win the battle over the inward nature of the “*old man*” or the outward sin that surrounds us each day. Paul wrote in Galatians 2: 20, *I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.* Paul also wrote in Romans 8:11, *But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.* Mathew Henry stated this fact eloquently in the following quote, “It is not enough that we cease to do evil, but we must learn to do well. Our Christianity obliges us not only to die unto sin, but to live unto righteousness; not only to oppose the works of the flesh, but to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit too. It was the design of the apostle to represent both the one and the other of these as our duty... (Galatians 5:25), If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.” It is only through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit within the heart of the Believer that we overcome and conquer sin!

Please permit me to present seven examples of scripture that supports the foundation of true holiness teaching as found in the New Testament:

**Example #1**-Jesus taught in Matt. 5: 21 *Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: 22 But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say,*

*Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. 23 Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; 24 Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. 25 Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. 26 Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing. 27 Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: 28 But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. 29 And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. 30 And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.*

**Example #2-Romans 6:1-2 & 12-15** *What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? 2 God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? 12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. 13 Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. 14 For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace. 15 What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.*

**Example #3-Colossians 5** *Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: 6 For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: 7 In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. 8 But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. 9 Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; 10 And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him*

**Example #4-1 Thessalonians 4:** *7 For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. 8 He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit.*

**Example #5-Titus 2:1** *But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine: 2 That the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. 3 The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; 4 That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, 5 To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed. 6 Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded. 7 In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, 8 Sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you. 9 Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, and to please them well in all things; not answering again; 10 Not purloining, but shewing all good fidelity; that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things. 11 For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, 12 Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world*

**Example #6-Ephesians 5:** *3 But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; 4 Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks. 5 For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of*

*God. 6 Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. 7 Be not ye therefore partakers with them.*

**Example #7**--*Galatians 5: 17 For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. 18 But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, 20 Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, 21 Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.*

**Conclusion:** May I ask some simple questions in conclusion: 1) Are the \*seven examples of scripture presented in our study addressed to Christian followers of Christ or to the lost world in general (my answer to this question is: I do not see how anyone could think that they are rules for a fallen world to live by)?, 2) If they are Christian rules of conduct for us to live by, can we choose which ones we like and throw the others, which seem to be antiquated and unappealing, away?, 3) Should our Christian conduct be based on New Testament scripture or on what others are doing within the church? (If we say "what others are doing within the church", aren't we disregarding scriptural teachings for personal opinions? Aren't we guilty of the same mistake as the "legalistic" preachers who substituted holiness for personal opinions)?, 4) If holiness is attained by grace alone, why does the Bible even address the subject of Christian conduct. If the today's teaching on grace is true and sin is no longer relevant for the modern Believer, why did the Holy Spirit allow such an irrelevant subject to be written in countless places throughout the New Testament--why did Jesus teach the Sermon on the Mount)?

Biblical holiness may turn people off or seem to make the Christian experience unappealing but it must be faithfully proclaimed in the backslidden and compromising churches of today. Time is short, we will all soon answer the summons and appear before our Sinless Judge to give account of every idle word that we have spoken. Biblical holiness is not "*legalistic*" or "*salvation by works*" or "*Old Testament bondage*" as taught by many modern teachers of today. It is the true teaching of the New Testament and illuminates our journey down the narrow path that leads to God. Please walk the common path of discipleship and biblical holiness because the Bible warns that without it *you will not see God nor inherit the kingdom of God.*

*\*Please note: there are countless other scriptures on holiness and Christian conduct throughout the New Testament but time and space will not permit me to include them all in my study. It has been my observation over the years, that if a person disregards seven examples of scripture, he wouldn't accept the truth if the entire Bible was used as a study guide.*