

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



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Obedience or Legalism?

In some places the Bible demands obedience; in other places it tells us that our obedience will never save us. How can these two positions be reconciled?

“Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?” (Rom. 6:16).

“But Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. . . . For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, ‘The man who does those things shall live by them’” (Rom. 9:31; 10:5).

These two passages in Paul's letter to the Romans, just three chapters apart, illustrate a thorny theological conundrum for the serious Bible student: On one hand, we have numerous Bible passages that emphasize the necessity of obeying God; we can't go to heaven without it (Matt. 7:21; Jn. 14:21; Jn. 15:10, 14; Phil. 2:12; Heb. 5:9; etc.). But these injunctions seem to be offset by equally strong declarations that we cannot be saved by our own obedience; any such approach to salvation, in fact, will doom us (Eph. 2:8-9; Tit. 3:5; Gal. 3:10-12; Phil. 3:9; 1 Jn. 1:8; etc.).

This problem is highlighted by the actions of Jesus, who insisted on our obedience (see above), yet excoriated the Pharisees for their fastidious devotion to the tiniest details of the Law (e. g., the Sabbath conflicts, Lk. 6:1-11). We even have a name for this latter abuse: *legalism*. It's a harsh insult to call someone a legalist; it's an accusation that they are too caught up in this obedience thing and need to relax a bit.

Clearly there are two conflicting viewpoints in play here. How can we reconcile them?

We'll start with the assumption that Jesus was not contradicting Himself. He was not talking out of both sides of His mouth when He insisted on obedience yet rebuked the rule-keeping of the Pharisees. If there is no contradiction, then the problem must be our working definition of one of the two positions.

The word “legalism” is a human invention, never used in the Scriptures, so that is our first suspect. The dictionary defines legalism as “strict adherence to the law, especially stressing the letter rather than the spirit of the law.”

The first part of this definition clearly is in conflict with the Biblical injunction to obey. Obedience must be “strict adherence” or it is not obedience at all (Matt. 5:18-19).

But the second part of the definition brings us closer to the real issue. Our efforts to obey God's law can morph into a self-serving exercise in intellectual snobbery. We can go so deep into trying to parse out every detail of every word, that we end up distorting the very law we claim to honor. That was the Pharisees' mistake; they constructed an elaborate system of regulations designed to ensure, for example, that people did not break the Sabbath law, but lost sight of the justice, mercy, and faith that was at the heart of God's law (Matt. 23:23). They took pride in their “obedience,” but it was a farcical caricature that fell far short of what God wanted.

We must strive to obey God; but in that striving, we must never think that our obedience is so precise, so correct, so *legally perfect*, that it can save us. We are sinners saved by grace, knowing that our service will never be perfect.

– David King