

Nomism comes from the Greek word *nomos*, which means “law.” The term *nomism* refers to a religious system that is strictly governed by rules and regulations with the idea that one can become acceptable to God by such observance. Sometimes nomism may be expressed in mere conformity and sometimes in sincere, heartfelt obedience. Either manifestation can be described as nomism.

Sometimes the word [legalism](#) is used in place of *nomism*. *Legalism*, however, can also refer to a mindset that many Christians have that, though they are saved by the grace of God apart from works, they are better than other Christians if they maintain a strict, often extrabiblical, code of conduct. These Christians may be legalists, but they would not be nomists.

In the [book of Galatians](#), Paul was writing against nomism. The nomists Paul countered were also called Judaizers. They taught that, in addition to faith in Christ, a person must submit to the Old Testament Law in order to be saved. They were not prescribing the law as a code of conduct but as a means of salvation. The law that they were emphasizing was [circumcision](#) for Gentile believers. Since circumcision was the rite of conversion to Judaism, the nomists probably had in mind that the circumcised Gentile would then keep all the other laws as well (see [Galatians 5:3](#)).

Paul’s response to that brand of nomism is clear and strong:

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God’s curse!” ([Galatians 1:6–9](#)). NIV

“We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified. . . . I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” ([Galatians 2:15–16, 21](#)). NIV

“For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’ Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God. . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” ([Galatians 3:10–11, 13](#)). NIV

Everywhere Paul encountered this teaching, he opposed it. *“Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’ This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them”* ([Acts 15:1–2](#)).

While God does expect Christians to live in a certain way and even keep “rules” (e.g., [Ephesians 4:17—6:9](#)), our ultimate acceptance before Him is based on the [righteousness of Christ](#), not our ability to keep the law and live righteous lives.