

## Legalism and the Law of God 6-10-18

As most of you are aware, I recently finished a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments. In response, one brother described to me how he would begin to feel like he was getting his life in order and then he would come to church and there discover another mess in his life or thinking that he would need to clean up. And he said this in a completely positive way; but I must admit it sort of bothered me. It is true that preaching ought to result in a conviction of sin, which is a good and joyful thing. It is the specific purpose of the law of God to do exactly that. But I recognize too that conviction of sin is not the sole purpose of preaching. There is to be a balance and some would suggest that twelve straight weeks on law, law, law is excessive. There are those, in fact, who would claim that I shouldn't do any sermons on the law because they say, "there is no place for that in a gospel church where we are supposed to be holding high the cross and declaring the grace of Christ." Well, I believe we did declare grace before and during this latest sermon series, but I am certainly sensitive to the charge some of my brothers make. I do not want to fall into the errors of legalism. "Legalism" now there is an interesting word. In Christian circles it is used like the world uses *homophobe* or *bigot*. It is something we all want to make sure we aren't associated with. But, my observations have led me to conclude that the word "legalism" or "legalist" is a very slippery word. It is used to refer to things and people who are vastly different. I hear the word thrown around frequently among Christians but I have come to view it warily, always wondering what someone means by it. And whenever someone is referred to as a legalist I like to ask the speaker, "what do you mean by that word, *legalist*?" That is not a bad question to ask when someone asks if you are a Calvinist, a Conservative or a Fundamentalist either.

Today's sermon will be a bit different than usual. I have no text. Lots of Scriptures but no main text. The subject, I suppose, is how Christians relate to God's law, but I want to address it by looking at those various uses of the dreaded word: *legalism*.

The first thing people may mean by the word *legalism* is a belief that one may obtain eternal life and blessing by obeying God's laws. A common name for this viewpoint is salvation by works and it is an extremely common position, held by millions in our society. Surveys show that around 80% of Americans believe in heaven and over 90% of those believers think they are going there. Some, granted, are more confident than others. But the question we want addressed is not if you think you are going to heaven, but why you think that? What is the ground of your confidence?

And when asked that question, in any number of ways, the answer you are most likely to get is some form of legalism. People say, *I have done my best to do right. I think I've done more good things than bad things.* So on it goes. When put into a more biblical context, the person is claiming to have earned eternal life by keeping the commandments of God. The person who teaches this as a genuine possibility may earn for himself the title, *legalist* which, in this case, means a person who looks to legal obedience as the way of salvation, as the way to be right with God.

What does the Bible say about this kind of legalism? It condemns it and reproves it and flatly contradicts it. All throughout the Bible God is presented as holy and pure so that no man dare claim righteousness before him. The idea that our merits could outweigh our demerits is opposed all over the Bible. The Psalmist says 130:3 *If You, Lord, should mark iniquities. O Lord, who could stand?* King David, the man after God's own heart wrote this in Psalm 143:2 *Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous.* No man living is righteous? No man. Even if we concede the theoretical possibility that law-keeping could win the favor of God we have to go on and say that nobody except Jesus has ever done it because for your obedience to be meritorious it would have to be what? Perfect. Matthew 5:48 *You are to be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.* And if that's the standard then it's far too late for me. I know it's too late for you too because Romans 3 says that no one is righteous. And if this is true, what do we conclude about law-keeping as the way of salvation? It is vanity. And it is more than vanity because the Scriptures make abundantly clear that law-keeping was never meant to be the plan of God for redeeming sinners. Romans 3:20 (ESV) *By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.* That is a purpose of the law - to show us our sin, not to redeem us from it. Galatians 2:16 (ESV) *A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.* Please don't misunderstand this basic tenet of Christianity. We don't believe we are heaven bound because we've obeyed. We know we have not obeyed and so we follow a Christ who obeyed in our place and died in our place. By faith in Him we become partakers of His merit, and our righteousness before God can only be seen as a gift. Did you know that eternal life is a gift? Romans 6:23 *The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* You cannot earn it. It is not for sale. It is simply offered to anyone who comes to Jesus in repentance and faith. What freedom there is in this! What bondage there is in a works salvation

legalism! This is the story of Martin Luther the leader of the great reformation. Luther was a man obsessed with his relationship to God, as we all have reason to be. He was a contemplative monk who followed all the rules set out for him by the church. He was meticulous in confession and in prayers and in penance but he was always haunted by the question, “have I done enough?” Luther was not free to love God. He felt entrapped by a formal law-keeping which could never give any assurance of salvation because it could never secure the salvation itself. He was tormented by guilt and wondering until he studied the book of Romans and there discovered the righteousness of God which is given to those who trust in Jesus. For Luther, as for many since, the lights were turned on and the chains fell off. A works-salvation legalism is an awful bondage. I urge you to leave it for the freedom of God’s gospel.

Now let’s look at another way people use the term “legalism.” Many times this word is applied to individuals who clearly do not teach salvation by works; who clearly do teach justification by grace through faith alone. But what legalism means in this instance has nothing to do with salvation. What can be meant by *legalism* is an excessive devotion to man-made rules of conduct. This is the philosophy which virtually equates Christianity with a list of dos and don’ts, mostly don’ts. Excessive devotion to man-made rules of conduct. What comes to your mind? I begin to think of rules about what kind of clothes you wear, and how you cut your hair, and the music that is acceptable and isn’t acceptable. And don’t misunderstand me. There may be some valid, solid thinking behind certain scruples, but when they become the emphasis of one’s faith you really do have a problem. Jesus addressed this problem in the pharisees of his day. He saw that here was a group of people who made so much of little things that they missed the big picture. He saw a group so caught up in their own petty regulations that they were missing the true requirements of God’s law. Mark 7:5 *The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?”* What are they concerned about? Whose laws are the disciples trampling on? Not God’s law, but the tradition of the elders. Tradition! Every group has it. Even certain anti-traditional groups have their traditional ways of being anti-traditional. Here the pharisees are peeved because the men of Jesus were not following their rules for washing hands. Now, with a world going to hell that is something to get worried about isn’t it? Mark 7:6-7 *And He said to them, “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. 7 ‘But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’”* Doing what?

Teaching as doctrines, as though they were God's rule, the precepts of men - human ideas. And so skewed was their thinking that Jesus says **8** *Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.* How can we avoid this kind of legalism? I think the primary thing we must do is to keep our nose in God's book always looking to see what it is God cares about. What laws does He establish? What concerns does He express? And as you study the Scriptures hold up your own values, and the values and rules of your Christian sub-culture, and the teaching of your pastor and the teaching of your radio teacher or talk show host to the light of Scripture so that you can see where your tradition and the word of God don't match up.

Alright, what else is there that gets called *legalism*? We've seen that some use it to mean a belief in salvation by works. Others use it to mean an excessive devotion to man-made rules. Thirdly, there are some who use it to describe those who believe in the importance of obeying God's law. These so-called "legalists" are people who think that under the new covenant it still is important to do what God says in the Bible. And what does Jesus say about this kind of legalist? **Matthew 5:19** *Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.* Are we to be legalists in this sense of the term? Absolutely. If this is a legalist put me down for it because Jesus was one of these too. Jesus preached justification by faith alone. He said that you will be saved by your faith in Him. But, He also taught that true faith will bring forth appropriate fruit and that your trust will show itself in obedience. And when you follow in the teaching of Jesus and some uninformed Christian calls you a legalist don't be upset. There are some people you want to have against you. And Matthew 5:19 assures you that you're okay with Jesus.

Does it sound like I've been thru this? You can be sure I have. Several times I have been accused of legalism and as I have pushed for a definition this third meaning has surfaced. I plead guilty. I do believe that obedience is important. And I would not simply take a defensive posture on this matter. I would also go on offense to confront the error of the antinomian. That last word I used is anti-nomian. It means "against the law" and refers to someone who believes and teaches that as Christians under grace we have no relationship to Biblical law. They quote verses that teach we are not under law but under grace and they misapply such teaching. Here is a book someone gave me to read, I suppose to straighten out my thinking on these things. It is called *Grace Walk*. Sounds nice. Page 109: *The only thing the Ten Commandments can do is minister condemnation and death.*

The author is a pastor. The book put out by an evangelical publishing house. He claims that the commandments of God, rather than being a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, they are only death to us. I wish this kind of thing was truly rare. But there are dear, misled antinomians abounding in the church. But not every antinomian is the same. There are antinomians of different type and degree, and I would like to describe for you three classes of this species.

First, there is the radical antinomian. This is the kind of guy who says, “I can sin all I want because I’m forgiven.” He flaunts the notion of being under grace and implies that there is no connection between the way you live and your relationship with God. This perspective is taken on by the apostle Paul in Romans chapter 6. In the previous chapter Paul had been arguing that eternal life is a gift of God’s grace; and now he imagines the objections which might arise. **6:1** *What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? Huh? Do we say as some do that “God and I have a lovely arrangement. I love to sin and He loves to forgive?”* **2** *May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?* He goes on to argue in Romans 8 that God’s purpose in saving us was that we might live in obedience to the law of God **3-4a** *For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us.* This is God’s purpose now **4** *So that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.* If I want to magnify the grace of Jesus I will make much of His ability not only to forgive a man but to transform a man. But the radical antinomian offers no connection between faith and works. He will usually recommend obedience. He will usually suggest that obedience will make this life nicer and the next life better. But he will never agree that obedience to Christ is a necessary outgrowth of believing in Christ. Many, many, dear brothers and sisters in Jesus sadly uphold this mistaken dogma. Listen to how they speak and you will see what I mean. Typically these folks talk about two kinds of Christians. Many Christians they say, are saved and heaven bound and walking in obedience to Jesus. This group is usually referred to as the Spirit-filled, a term which distinguishes them from the other group of Christians who are apparently not Spirit-filled, who don’t walk in obedience, who have not yet accepted the Lordship of Jesus but who still are true Christians and headed to heaven. Brethren, I could spend the next hour debunking that myth from passage after passage in the New Testament but we will have to let one verse suffice. John 3:**36** *He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God*

*abides on him.* Does that verse leave any possibility of there being a group of believing, saved, but disobedient persons? Not at all. What will be the destiny of the chronically disobedient? The wrath of God abides on them. If I am not seeking to follow Jesus Christ and to keep His word I have no grounds to think I'm truly saved. Where there is true, saving faith there will also be the evidence of Christian obedience to God's will. Perfect obedience? No. We still struggle with the flesh, but sincere devotion and a zeal for righteousness marks out every true child of God.

We move on to the second form of popular antinomianism which is held by those I will call "loving" antinomians. This is the person who says that the law of commandments has been replaced by the law of love. All those rules and things which bound the conscience in bygone days have given way to the simple rule to do the loving thing. What do you think? Is that what Jesus taught? Matthew 22:34-40 *But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. 35 One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" 37 And He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the great and foremost commandment. 39 The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.'"* Shall we conclude from this that the love commandment has now replaced all the others? By no means. You will notice that both verse 37 and 39 are quotes from the Old Testament Scriptures. These are not new commandments replacing old ones. These just give us a summary of the law, not a substitute for it. The problem I see with the loving antinomian is that he fails to explain why God gave us so many other rules if all we have to do is love. He doesn't see that love, as an attitude of the heart, is insufficient to direct our moral conduct. We have to know how to love. We have to know what love to God and others means in practical choices. You cannot obey the commandments unless you do love but you surely can't love rightly without the commandments. I would also object that love is too vague, too hard to nail down, too slippery to serve as a moral code. How many times have people gotten divorces on the basis of love? How many parents have refused to discipline their kids because of love? The capacity of humans to deceive themselves is enormous, which explains all the loving adulteries and loving thefts and loving diseases. I should note that millions of mothers and thousands of doctors have determined that when it comes to that unborn child the choice of love may also include ending its life. After all, I'm told, we want every child to be a planned and wanted child. So the merciful thing, the loving thing is to simply destroy the unplanned child before we see

his or her face. I'm sorry folks, I am too sinful and so are you to be given no other rule than love. John 14:**15** *If you love Me you will keep My commandments.* Love does not replace the commandments. It does not oppose the commandments. It keeps the commandments. **21ab** *He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me.* I John 5:**2-3** *By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.* Not burdensome. Indeed they are freedom for the man or woman who longs to please God. His law directs us how. II John **6a** *This is love, that we walk according to His commandments.* Antinomianism is Scripturally confused. In some cases, its only basis is indolence and self-will.

Thirdly, then we have not only the radical antinomian and the loving antinomian there is also the spiritual antinomian. The spiritual antinomian tells us that we don't need the law because we have the Holy Spirit living in us. I was confronted by a man in a swimming pool one time who accused me of being a fundamentalist because, as he put it, I believed in the dead letter rather than the living spirit. He concluded this because I was so into what the Bible says and doesn't say. The spiritual antinomian thinks he is led directly by the Spirit of God and therefore doesn't need the Bible, at least not the instructions in it. They will say, "The Lord told me to do this and to do that." And they are right in seeing that true Christians are led by God's Spirit. We do have a teacher and Counselor living within us. Romans 8:**14** *All who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.* So what is the problem? The problem is that the same God who gives us His Spirit also gave us 66 books which I'm told are inspired by God and given for my reproof and correction and training in righteousness. God obviously thinks I still need the Bible. And in that Bible I find not only teaching about the indwelling Holy Spirit who renews me and teaches me and guides me, I also read about the principle of sin within me that continues to war against the Spirit. The spiritual antinomian does not take seriously our indwelling sin, our ability to misread the voice of God within us. In some circles, where this error is typically found, you find people approving all kinds of folly because "God told me to." God gets blamed for all kinds of stuff. Adolph Hitler even claimed that God told him to kill all those Jews. And if you are a spiritual antinomian how do you object? What objective rule do we have for saying what God approves and doesn't approve? We have the holy Scriptures - not a dead letter, but the ever living, but never changing, word of God. Don't bury it under a mountain of spiritual talk.

Now please understand. I believe that Christians ought to be led by the Spirit and taught by the Spirit. I believe the Holy Spirit tells me to do things. But He normally does that through the Bible. Rather than pit the Holy Spirit against the Bible as some will do, let's realize that the Holy Spirit is the origin of the Bible. II Peter 1:20-21 *No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, 21 for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.* I am not one who thinks the Holy Spirit has to use a Bible verse to get a message out but I am persuaded that 99% of what He wants to say to us He has already said, and if you are serious about giving the Holy Spirit control of your life you must get to know His word and do what it says. The Spirit's word to His people now is no different than it was 3000 years ago. The Spirit is leading us to honor our parents, and speak the truth and revere God's name and be faithful in our marriages.

Dear friends, our law keeping is not the way to be saved. That way is Jesus. His person, His law-keeping, His death, His mediation. We put our faith in Him and are saved from sin. Law-keeping cannot do that. But our obedience to the law is an outcome of that salvation. And because it is God's purpose in our salvation it will certainly be salvation's result in us. If you are sitting among us today a stranger to Jesus and His gospel I would extol the wonders of His grace before you now. He does offer forgiveness, forgiveness full and free. But His salvation goes beyond even that and promises to make us whole and well within so that His law which was a threat to us before now is our delight and our friend. All this is promised us when we repent of our sins and embrace the Lord Jesus who is Savior and King. Shall we pray in His name...