

The Marrow Controversy #02: Danger of Legalism

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... no doubt have in recent years purchased those two volumes of the works of Robert Traill and perused them with some interest, and you may know these words that appertain to the subject with which we are to deal with this morning. In one of those several majestic works that he wrote, this particular one bearing the succinct title, *A Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine Concerning Justification and of its Preachers and Professors from the Unjust Charge of Antinomianism in a Letter from the Author to a Minister in the Country*, Robert Traill has this very striking and important thing to say,

“That which concerneth our case is that the middle way betwixt the Arminians and the orthodox had been espoused and strenuously defended and promoted by some non-conformists of great note for piety and parts, and usually such men that are for middle ways in points of doctrine have a greater kindness for that extreme to which they halfway go than for that from which they half way come.”

And it was something of that subtle order of things that you and I have often recognized as we have looked upon Christendom and as we have looked perhaps upon our own people that was beginning to happen in the days of the Marrow Controversy. We saw very briefly in our first study yesterday that on the day the General Assembly had condemned the Auchterarder Creed and condemned those who were to follow it, known as the Marrow Men, two cases had in fact appeared before the assembly for jurisdiction.

The Auchterarder creed on the one hand—taken and condemned—but on the same day, John Simpson, professor of divinity at the University of Glasgow, had been accused of propagating Arminianism. His case had dragged on since the year 1715. Indeed there can be very little doubt that he had given vocal expression to Arminianism in contradiction of the confession of the church, and he was later, it seems, in his own peculiar way to teach Arianism.

But in effect, Simpson received little more than a rap over the knuckles and was acquitted with a warning, I quote, "...not to attribute too much to natural reason and the power of corrupt nature to the disparagement of revelation and efficacious free grace." And yet despite the wording of the churches and the assembly's rebuke where the fathers and

brethren really stood on that occasion was far more evident from their harsh reaction to the Marrow Doctrine than from their relatively sympathetic reaction to Arminianism, even although that Marrow Doctrine had been sharply, and perhaps unhappily, expressed.

And the truth of the matter historically speaking was that this Presbyterian Church was on a doctrinal and spiritual slope. It was falling away from the wonders of free grace towards the bondage of Legalism, and it was gaining momentum with every turn on the way down. It was, therefore, as you see, from Traill's comments showing greater kindness to an Arminianism which proved to be a halfway house to full blown Legalism and allowed some place for the works and righteousness of man in the great work of salvation. Its confession taught that salvation was by free grace and free grace alone, and to that confession to a man, the general assembly gave verbal assent and consent. And all the while the members' hearts, many of them, were the stoney hearts of men hurtling towards a most subtle and dangerous form of Legalism.

And what we are therefore dealing with when we come to study together some of the pastoral lessons which arise from the Marrow Controversy is, as I suggested yesterday, the dangers of Legalism on the one hand and the danger on the other of Antinomianism. That danger that I want us to address ourselves to this morning is the danger of Legalism. And I do so, among many other reasons, because, as God willing we shall discover tomorrow, it is impossible for us ever to understand the nature of Antinomianism until we have first understood the nature of Legalism.

And this was the great concern, I say to you this morning, of the Marrow Men in the 18th century. They had begun with these spiritual antennae that God had given them to detect the presence of a legal strain in the thinking and then in the preaching of professing Calvinists, and they saw clearly in the assembly's reaction to the Auchterarder creed that the storms of Legalism they had detected coming over the horizon were now ready to burst in a great cloud to cover over the sunshine of the glory of the free grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

And I want to say to you, brethren, that increasingly I feel and believe we all ought to feel that this is a matter of immense practical and pastoral importance and relevance. When we are speaking of Legalism, we are not speaking about some curiosity that belongs to the schools, some remote recondite academic problem that could never touch us in our pastoral situation, that could never touch us who have come to an understanding of free grace. When we address ourselves to the condition known as Legalism and that legal frame, we are speaking about one of the most subtle and all pervasive influences that can ever twist a man's soul away from the God of grace and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And I want to say to you, brethren, today that when we consider Legalism, there is a sense in which we are considering *the ultimate pastoral problem of all*, because what we seek to do is we seek to bring men from Legalism into free grace is to undo what Satan did in the Garden of Eden when he persuaded man that God was not only a God of moral law written in man's being, of positive law expressed in the vocalized commandments of

God, but when Satan came and sought to persuade that man and woman that the God whom they had come to know and worship was a God of essentially legalistic and binding tendencies, of narrow and restrictive spirit, shutting man in to a way of self-merited justification with no gracious promise at what lies at the back of Satan's words to these our parents in the Garden of Eden when he said, "Did God say you cannot eat of any, any fruit of any of the trees of the Garden?" He was simply seeking to persuade Adam and Eve that the God who reigns in glory above is a God who seeks to bind his creatures with a spirit of legal framework in their relationship to him and perverts the free grace of God. "You may eat of the tree of any of these in the garden, but this one in which I establish my moral law."

And so with this persuasion of Legalism, this persuasion of the narrow restricted, restrictive legalistic heart of God, has Satan sought to pervert it. The very first pastoral matter that needed to be dealt with in the history of the human race was the matter of a legal frame and bondage to a legal spirit. Because at the end of the day, you see brethren, it is Satan who is a legalist—if I may so express it—it is Satan who has taken the gracious promise of God in the Garden of Eden and turned it into what has sometimes been regarded as the baneful and malignant influences of a covenant of works, that which is held out to us, if we so understand it, in these early chapters of a gracious promise of life, a covenant of life. And how often Satan has come, in especially those who have been adversaries of reformed theology, and seen in what has become known as the covenant of works a restrictive and a restricting and a legalistic God.

So that what we deal with when we speak about Legalism is something that is embedded in the heart of man almost from the very day of his creation. And that is why in this matter we need the wisdom of Solomon if we are truly to be pastors and nursing mothers to the children of God. And my dear brothers in the gospel, we come to recognize that this situation with which we deal, of seeking to bring the gospel of grace to those who are of a legal frame, is all the more complicated because we who bring such a gospel of free grace to them come often ourselves with a legal frame in our own hearts.

And so we give attention to some of the most important areas of our pastoral work, and we discover, do we not, that when we are faced with practical Antinomianism, or what you Americans call "easy believism", so often our instinctive response is the response of Legalism rather than the response of free grace. So this is not a matter for the schools, my brothers. It is not merely a matter for our congregations. This is a matter for our own hearts. And it was as these Marrow Men found their own hearts exposed before the power of the grace of God and were delivered from their natural Legalism—and every single one of them confesses by nature he was a legalist as we ourselves do—we find that this indeed is meat and drink for the pastoral ministry.

Now there are five areas, God helping us, that I want us to address ourselves to this morning. First of all, we will consider together the nature of Legalism. Secondly, the specific development of Legalism to the time of the Marrow Controversy. Thirdly, we will look at some of the causes of Legalism. Fourthly, we will look at the pastoral dangers of Legalism. And, fifthly, we will seek to look at the Biblical remedy for

Legalism. Unless you think you would be quicker if you got that copy of the Marrow at the back and read it through for yourself, let me say that we will only be able to deal with these five points in a very hasty manner.

First of all, then, the nature of Legalism. You will discover, I'm sure, in your dictionaries that they tend to define Legalism in terms of a straightforward doctrine of justification by works rather than justification by grace. But, of course, as you know from your own ministry, things are rarely as straightforward as the dictionaries define them. And since the days of the Marrow Men and the days of the Apostles and since the days of our own blessed Savior here upon the Earth, it has frequently been discovered that Legalism takes many forms and has many faces.

The essence of Legalism, whatever face it may wear, is that, at the end of the day, it proves to be a distortion of the grace of God. And for that reason, as you will often have noticed, Legalism is also necessarily not only a distortion of the gospel but, by its very nature, it must be a distortion of the law. And you will remember when Paul sets out in his letters to Rome and Galatia, for example, to deal a death blow to Legalism he does not do so at the expense of the law.

“Do we overthrow the law by this teaching of grace through faith?” he asks in Romans 3. By no means! On the contrary, grace does not overthrow the Law. The reverse—grace confirms the law. It is Legalism that destroys grace, and it is Legalism that we shall see that also distorts Law from its original God-given character and function.

Take, for example, the Pharisees. In the evangelical tradition, these men have often been presented in popular preaching as men whose creed was a straightforward form of works righteousness. But you well know that their true theological and practical position was infinitely more subtle than that. Just as the true position of Roman dogma is never presented as straightforward works righteousness but is always disguised in an infinitely more subtle form. The Pharisees did not so much oppose the way of works to the way of grace, *simplicitas*, but rather so often mixed the way of works with the way of grace.

The same is true, as you'll recall, in the epistle to the Galatians. And Paul has to argue to the logical conclusion of mixing grace with works is to destroy grace. But the position the Galatians believed they held was not a denial of grace, but a mingling of grace with works that was indeed a denial of grace. Listen to these words of John Colquhoun of Leith., a Marrow Man, as many of you may know, born out of due season writing in one of his fine works *The Law and The Gospel*, he says this:

“A man is to be counted a legalist or self righteous if, while he does not pretend that his obedience is perfect, he yet relies on it for a title to life. Self-righteous men have in all ages set aside as impossible to be fulfilled by them that condition of the covenant of works which God had imposed on Adam and have framed for themselves various models of that covenant, which, though they are far from being institutions of God and stand upon terms lower than perfect obedience, yet are of the nature of a covenant of works. The unbelieving Jews who sought righteousness by the works of the Law were not so

very ignorant or presumptuous as to pretend to perfect obedience. Neither did those professed Christians in Galatia, who desired to be under the Law and to be justified by the Law, of whom the Apostle therefore testified that they had fallen from grace, presumed to plead that they could yield perfect obedience.

On the contrary, their public profession showed that they had some sense of their need of Christ's righteousness, but their great error was this: they did not believe that the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone was sufficient to entitle them to the justification of life. And, therefore, they depended for justification partly upon their own obedience to the moral and the ceremonial law. It was this, and not their pretensions to perfect obedience, that the Apostle had in view when he blamed them for cleaving to the law of works and for expecting justification by the works of the Law.

By relying for justification partly on their own works of obedience to the moral and ceremonial laws, they, as the apostle informed them, were fallen from grace. Christ was become of no effect to them, and they were debtors to the whole law. You see he pushes them to logical conclusion of their position, which they failed to see in their joining of works and grace. By depending for justification partly on their imperfect obedience to the law, they framed the law into a covenant of works, and such a covenant of works too as could admit of imperfect instead of perfect obedience. And by relying partly on the righteousness of Christ, they mingled the law with the gospel and works with faith in the affair of justification. Thus, they perverted both the law and the gospel. And formed for the themselves a motley covenant of works.

And this is the very distortion that we generally face when we preach the gospel to the natural man. And it is a very subtle distortion of the truth indeed, and it is compounded, you see, in our pastoral work by this fact—that we encounter not only what we might call a doctrinal Legalism but there is also sometimes accompanying it, and frequently separate from it, an experimental Legalism. It is possible, as we all well know, to have a legal head and a legal heart, but it is also possible to have an evangelical head and a legal heart. And it was this very position that the Marrow Men found themselves controverting.

And that is why one of the problems of the Marrow Controversy was that their opponents professed the most thoroughgoing orthodoxy this world has ever seen in the Westminster Confession of Faith—men who tenaciously, as I said yesterday, subscribed to reformed and evangelical theology in its most comprehensive and potentially most powerful form. And that was why to took a creed like the Auchterarder creed and a book like the Marrow, the free grace of God expressed in perhaps clumsy, and certainly in radical, terms to smoke out of the dark burrows of Legalism the hearts of men with an orthodox theology and a legal spirit.

And in that sense what the Marrow itself and the Auchterarder creed and the Marrow Controversy did was this. These things acted, as it were, like a piece of litmus paper, of no great significance in and of themselves, but demonstrating by their touch whether there was the presence of acid or alkaline, grace or Legalism. These men, the Marrow

Men, were neither Legalists nor Antinomians, but the moment their teaching in all its radical form touched the heart of men that were, they were inevitably shown in their true colors.

And so we may say that Legalism is any teaching which either distorts the free grace of God in the gospel or distorts the true nature of God's grace in the law or even fails to place the gracious law of God in its proper place in redemptive history. And it was on all these fronts that the Marrow Men wrote in polemic fashion for the free grace of God.

So there briefly is the nature of Legalism, or we might even say the natures of Legalism. Now, in the second place, let me say something about the development of Legalism in the period of the Marrow.

The reason the Auchterarder Creed—"I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ"—created so much consternation was because it struck exposed nerves in legalistic hearts. Over the years in the reformed tradition, certainly in Scotland and possibly elsewhere, there had taken place an unnoticed but very real change in the reformed *ordo salutis*, or the personal experience of the benefits of redemption.

What the Auchterarder Creed was saying was this—that in the preaching and proclamation of the gospel, it is ever grace that precedes faith, that repentance is a condition neither of the gospel offer, nor is it indeed, strictly speaking, to be considered a condition of salvation. In pristine reformed theology, as you will probably know, repentance, for example in Calvin, was never seen as a cause of grace nor as a condition of grace but always as the consequence of grace. And it was the overcoming of this truly evangelical order that led to truly evangelical repentance, which was at the heart of the controversy in the early 18th century in Scotland.

Now the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* already in the 17th century had puts its finger on exactly this point. It suffered, of course, from the traditional divisions of the Puritans, but in Part 1, Chapter 2, Section 3, Subsection 4, the following conversation is recorded between Evangelista, the minister or pastor, and Nomista, the legalist.

Nomista speaks first.

“But yet sir, you see that Christ requires a thirsting before a man come unto him, but which, I conceive, cannot be without true repentance.”

The pastor replies.

“In the last chapter of the Revelation, verse 17, Christ makes the same general proclamation saying, ‘let him that is athirst come.’ And as if the Holy Ghost had so long since answered the same objection that is yours, it follows in the next words, ‘and whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely even without thirsting if we will,’

John 6:37. But because it seems you conceive he ought to repent before he believes, I pray you tell me what do you conceive repentance to be or wherein does it consist?"

And you will notice already here, if I may interject, that subtle confusion that has so often taken place in reformed thinking between conviction of sin and repentance from sin.

And Legalist replies.

"Why, I conceive that repentance consists of a man humbling himself before God and sorrowing and grieving for offending Him by sins and then turning from them all to the Lord."

Evangelista.

"And would you have a man do all this truly before he comes to Christ by believing?"

Legalist.

"Yes, indeed, I think it is very meet he should."

Evangelista.

"Why, then, I tell you truly, you would have him do that which is impossible. For first of all, godly humiliation and true penitence proceeds from the love of God, their good Father, and so from the hatred of that sin which has displeased him, and this cannot be without faith. Secondly, sorrow and grief for displeasing God necessarily argue the love of God, and it is impossible we should ever love God until by faith we know ourselves loved by God. Thirdly, no man can turn to God except he be first turned of God. And after he is turned, he repents. So Ephraim says, 'After I was converted I repented,' Jeremiah 31:19.

"The truth is, a repentant sinner first believes that God will do that which he promiseth—namely, pardon his sin and take away his iniquity—then he rests in the hope of it. And from that and for it he leaves sin and will forsake his old course because it is displeasing to God and will do that which is pleasing and acceptable to him so that, first of all, God's favor is apprehended and remission of sins believed. Then upon that cometh alteration of life and conversion."

Unto these words, Thomas Boston set his seal. He indicates in lengthy notes that this is his understanding of the way of salvation. And I want to try to show you briefly this morning that this is also the position of the man from whom so many of us take our name, nickname though it so often be, so that we may be in no doubt as to the reformed pedigree of this great emphasis on the free grace of God that brings us to repentance.

You well know that Calvin's presupposition—that of all good reformed divines—is this: that we cannot divide faith and repentance chronologically. The true Christian believes

penitently, and he repents believingly. But in the order of nature, Calvin argues, repentance can never precede faith. In the order of nature the only way we can conceive it is that faith precedes repentance—in the order of nature, I say, never in the order of chronology, just as grace and regeneration precede faith.

Listen to Calvin.

“Both repentance and forgiveness of sins, that is, newness of life and free reconciliation, are conferred on us by Christ and both are attained by us through faith.”

And again:

“It ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith but is also born of faith. For since pardon and forgiveness are offered through the preaching of the gospel in order that the sinner, freed from the tyranny of Satan, the yolk of sin, and the miserable bondage of vices, may cross over into the kingdom of God, surely no one can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself, then, from the errors of his past life into the right way and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance. There are some, however, who suppose that repentance precedes faith rather than flows from it or is produced by it as fruit from a tree. Such persons have never known the power of repentance and are moved to feel this way by an unduly slight argument.

And again:

“When we refer the origin of repentance to faith we do not imagine some space of time during which it brings it to the birth, but we do mean to show that a man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance without knowing himself to belong to God. But no one is truly persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God's grace.”

What then is it? What doctrine is it that the Marrow and the Auchterarder Creed and the Marrow Men so strenuously oppose? It was essentially, at the root of the matter, a failure to be biblically evangelical. It was certainly, undoubtedly a failure to be reformed in the most in depth sense, because they saw the Legalism that was rising to be a subtle falling back into the old Medieval pattern of salvation by works against which Calvin and Luther fought tooth and nail: penitence meriting grace, penitence meriting forgiveness.

However carefully that change in the *ordo salutis* was disguised under the canopy of a reformed title, repentance that merited grace, in the eyes of the Marrow Men, was the same thing as bondage and Legalism.

My brothers, I wonder if something of the power of this has gripped and grasped our own souls. It's already there, as I say again to you, in the parable of the prodigal son—or as we might well call it, the parable of the free grace father—the prodigal, the sinner who is welcomed home. And you can see him, can you not, wondering in his heart, "Have I felt

sorrow enough for my sin in order that my Father may accept me? Have I repented enough for my sin in order that my Father may accept me?"

But, you see, it is the knowledge of the supplies of grace that there are in the heart and in the house of his father that bring the man to himself in the first place and then begin to draw him home. And in the father's arms as he is drawn to his bosom, any talk of conditions that must be met to qualify for the unmerited love his Father pours upon him are silenced in the loving embrace in the bosom of the Father.

And yet in that same father's heart lurks anxiety for his firstborn.

"Did not I meet all the conditions? Have not I merited the ring and the robe and the fattened calf and the feast? Did I not merit them?"

"Oh," says the Father, "it is all yours unconditionally and freely, but your legal heart will never set you free to enjoy it. You will only take free grace on condition that you have merited it. And under those conditions you can never have it."

Brethren, I scarcely need to underline for you that there is always the danger that the spirit of the elder brother, the spirit of the Legalist, will invade both the preaching of the free grace of God and our pastoral application of it to the flock of God.

So we consider briefly something of the nature of Legalism, something of the development of Legalism in those days of the Marrow Controversy. And in the third place we give attention to what I have called the causes of Legalism.

One of the plain facts which began to emerge from the Marrow Controversy was that Legalism could almost always be traced back to the same basic principles, no matter what particular face or mask it might wear. And we have time to consider only three of these. They may not be the most common in your experience, in some ways they may not be the most important, but they are three very real causes of Legalism at all times and in all places in the hearts of God's people.

And it will be clear when we look at them, I believe, that when we come to deal pastorally with Legalism we will find some evidence of these causes needing to be rooted out of the hearts of our people. And we will need to know, brothers, what maladies may be brought to the birth by a spirit of Legalism, why they are there, and what gracious medicine the gospel provides to deliver men and women and, yes, boys and girls from such malignant spiritual disease.

What are three of the causes of Legalism in the hearts of men and even in the hearts of God's people?

A first cause of Legalism is a failure truly to grasp that justification is by free grace and received by faith.

You remember it was Martin Luther who said that justification was the standing or falling article of the Church, but, brethren, it is also the standing or falling article of the individual believer. And the strength or weakness of our grasp of justification by faith and its domination of our hearts is bound to be the index and the measure of the liberty of God's children that we enjoy.

You remember the apostle's burning passion to make free justification, by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, the foundation stone of the gospel. And you remember the great blessings he promises it brings: peace with God, joy in tribulations, joy in the hope of the glory of God, joy in God Himself, no condemnation for the believer, no prison cell existence, no spirit of bondage. For what the Law could not do in that it was weak through our flesh, God has done sending his Son in the likeness of the flesh of sin and for sin condemning sin in the flesh that those who walk in the Spirit might have the just requirement of the Law fulfilled in them in the total liberty of the bondage of the yolk of Christ. There is no room for Legalism. Boasting is excluded, says the apostle. On what principle? On the principle of works? NO!, he says, not even on the principle of works, but on the principle of the free grace of God.

And these are some of the glorious fine declarations that we proclaim to lost men and women: that God in Christ reconciled the world to himself and comes offering armloads of free grace to any who will come.

But we would be very naive to assume that evangelical or even Reformed people have grasped this the way they need to. Beloved, the sooner we learn in our ministries that it is not teaching on the so-called "deeper truths" of the Christian life that our people need the better. It is the uncovering of the mighty power of God in these fundamental truths of the gospel that will lead our people out into such heartfelt liberty that they will cry, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his Holy Name, that I am a justified and eternally justified sinner by the grace of God in Christ, and I am free from the condemnation of the Law to serve him for his glory."

And yet, you see, the spirit of Legalism so easily creeps into our thinking, particularly in two areas. It is so easy for the legal spirit, my brothers, to creep into our thinking about the gospel offer.

You know, Samuel Rutherford, a man whom surely there has never been a more intellectual experimental Calvinist, once said this. I put this to you as the litmus paper of Samuel Rutherford.

"The reprobate hath the same warrant to believe in Christ as the elect."

You see, it is nothing less than that kind of extreme statement of the free offer of the gospel that unravels whether our hearts still smack of that legalistic framework that we introduce an "if" and a "but" into our offer of the gospel of Christ to lost sinners. Let me quote to you again from Traill's fine work on justification.

“Is it desired that we should forbear to make a free offer of God's grace in Christ to the worst of sinners? This cannot be granted by us, for this is the gospel faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance and therefore worthy of all our preaching of it, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners and the chief of them. This was the apostolic practice. They began at Jerusalem, where the Lord of Life was wickedly slain by them. And yet Life in and through his blood was offered to and accepted and obtained by many of them with the blood of our Savior on their hands." The free offer of Jesus Christ was made to such Jerusalem sinners. "And so," says Traill, "would we unconditionally offer Christ to Jerusalem sinners. Shall we tell men that unless they be holy they must not believe on Jesus Christ, that they must not venture on Christ for salvation until they be qualified and fit to be received and welcomed by him? This were to forebear preaching the gospel at all or to forbid men to believe in Christ, for never was any sinner qualified for Christ. He is well qualified for us, 1 Corinthians 1:30. But a sinner out of Christ hath no qualification for Christ but sin and misery. Nay, suppose, suppose an impossibility, that a man were qualified for Christ. I boldly assert that such a man would not nor could ever believe on Christ, for faith is for lost, helpless, condemned sinners casting themselves on Christ for salvation, and the qualified is no such person.

“Shall we warn people that they should not believe on Christ too soon? It is impossible that they should do it too soon. Can a man obey the great gospel command too soon or do the great work of God too soon? Oh, Beloved, let us not put stumbling blocks in the way of Jerusalem sinners.”

But Legalism, you see, creeps not only into our thinking about the offer of the gospel, it also creeps into our thinking about the character of sanctification. And you'll remember that this is what was happening in the churches in Galatia and Colosse, those letters in which Paul has such striking things to say about the relationship of the believer to the Law. It was Legalism in the heart that was at the root of the distortion of the gospel in Galatia. They had begun with the Spirit who was fulfilling in them the things the Law required, and now they were ending with the flesh. They had begun with faith, but now they were seeking a sanctification that had works as its foundation and merited favor with God as a result.

And the same basic principle was operated in Colosse. There was the promise made of a second blessing, a fullness not hitherto known by justifying faith. But what was this second blessing rooted in? It was rooted in that deviation that has ever since haunted evangelical churches like a specter—Legalism. Merit the second blessing by obedience to the Law. And what does it do, says Paul, it detracts from the fullness of our Lord Jesus Christ for justification, and, at the end of the day, it has no power to mortify sin, but only serves to indulge it. For this reason, it is legalistic, based on works and, therefore, fleshly and carnal and never spiritual and gracious.

So the first cause of Legalism often, theologically speaking, is a failure to grasp the sheer liberating power of the truth that justification is *sola gratia, sola fide, solo Christo*. It is by grace alone! It is received through faith alone unmixed with works. It is to be found in Christ alone who is full of grace for Jerusalem sinners.

But a second cause of Legalism is this—a failure to distinguish between the law as a covenant of works and the law as a rule of life.

Now that, of course, as you immediately recognize is the language of the Marrow, of the Marrow Men, and of the whole Westminster Confession tradition of theology. So says the Confession, "True believers be not under the law as a covenant of works to be thereby justified or condemned, yet it is of great use to them as well as to others as a rule of life."

Now beloved, whether we as individuals employ this time-honored language of the covenant of works or not—which is certainly not the issue we are presently discussing—the point that is being made is surely clear enough. Legalism arises not only out of a distortion of the grace of God in justification. It arises when a man looks upon the law of God as though it itself were the way of works righteousness. We could put it this way: that Legalism arises when we fail to see the difference between the gracious covenant of law that God made with men at Sinai and a contract of law by which we bargained with God as a way of salvation. His covenant is his free, sovereign gracious disposition, his self-giving, his "whole-souled self-giving," as Professor Murray used to say. And a contract is a bargain negotiated on agreed terms for salvation.

Now Sinai was never such a contract. It was never a legalistic bargain expounding conditions for grace. It always was and remains the word of God's unconditional grace,

"I am the Lord who brought you out of land of bondage out of the house of Egypt."

And his unconditional demands.

"Thou shalt have no other Gods before me."

And, you see, this is why the Marrow Men and we who follow them, if we do, needed to learn to press home upon their people not only the message of free justification by the grace of God, but to press home upon the people the free grace of God in the giving of the Sinaitic law. For until they are persuaded that the grace of God has been deposited in his Law as well as in his Gospel, they will never find anything at Sinai but thunder and lightning and eternal judgment.

Listen again, will you, to John Colquhoun.

“The distinction of the divine law, especially unto the law as a covenant of works and as a rule of life, is a very important distinction. It is,” he says, “a scriptural distinction. And it is necessary in the hand of the Spirit to qualify believers for understanding clearly the grace and glory of the gospel as well as the acceptable manner of performing every duty required by the law. To distinguish truly and clearly between the law as covenant and the law as a rule is, as one expresses it, 'the key which opens the hidden treasure of the gospel.' No sooner had the Spirit of truth given Luther but a glimpse of that distinction than he declared he seemed himself to be admitted into paradise and that the whole face

of Scripture was changed to him. Indeed, without a spiritual and true knowledge of that distinction, a man can neither discern nor love nor obey acceptably the truth as it is in Jesus." And so long as men fail to see that the full revelation of grace in Jesus Christ shows us that Sinai was a pale revelation of that same redemptive grace that in Christ the 10 fingers, that they have seen as mighty accusations of their sin, become gracious friends upon a gracious foundation by which they may frame their way of life so long a man in a bondage frame of Spirit and stand in need of the grace of God in law and in gospel that they may be delivered.

My brethren, we need in our ministries to labor to some of our people some of the time, if not in every situation, all of the time, at least in some places some of the time we need to labor in our exposition of the fact that the law is not a means to salvation, but the law is the gracious way in which salvation leads us. It is the moral shape that salvation takes. The law is not a motor car to heaven, an automobile to heaven, it is, in and of itself and separated from grace, lacking an engine, lacking an oil, lacking in petrol, lacking in gas, lacking in wheels, lacking in road, but it is, in the hand of God, a map for those who have already been energized by the power of the Spirit, to set out before them those glorious signposts that point to the Celestial City, for those who are travelling in the triumphal chariot of our Lord Jesus Christ. The pastor of the gospel is the man who sits as a map reader with the law of God in his hand and leads his people in the way of perfect righteousness through the grace of God in the giving of the law.

And so we need to labor to bring to bear upon our people this distinction, however we may express it. And all of us recognize we are at liberty to express these truths in other words than our reformed fathers, but we need somehow to distinguish between the law as a covenant of works and the law as a rule of life.

The third cause of Legalism is this—and perhaps the most subtle. It is the legality inbred in men's hearts.

In many ways, I think, this is the key to that terrible cry of grief and frustration from the lips of the holy apostle Paul in Romans 7.

"I know that the Law is holy and it is good. It is full of grace like God himself, but as for myself I am carnal, sold under sin."

"Εγὼ δὲ σαρκινὸς εἰμι, πεπραμμένος ὑπὸ τῆν ἁμαρτιαν," he cries.

Πεπραμμένος, as you may well know, the perfect participle passive, "having been sold under sin." As A T Robertson expresses it vividly, "Sin has closed the mortgage and owns its slave."

And what Paul is surely saying and we know something of this in our experience is this. I am one whom, having been sold under sin, one upon whom sin had closed the mortgage, have now been purchased by the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ—no longer under the law as a covenant of works but under grace.

But my dear friends, when legality has paid and closed the mortgage on your life for many years, since you were conceived in your mothers womb, for many of us it takes days, and months, and years before the effect of the mortgaging of Jesus Christ and his heavenly purchase begins to dismantle all the influences and the effects that have been sown in our hearts by the previous occupier.

We know a little of this, if I may illustrate rather mundanely in our own home. For some two and a half years now we have been living in our house, and since we moved in we have been undoing almost everything the previous occupants did, or more accurately, we have been doing what the previous occupants had undone. In our kitchen where there had been cupboards, they took out all of the cupboards, and we have been saving up our pennies to put in our cupboards. In two of our public rooms, they decided to knock down the wall, and we have been saving up our pennies to knock the wall back in. In all the corridors in our houses in the United Kingdom, as you know, are so different from your houses here in the United States, they had knocked out all the doors. And we have been saving up our pennies to put back in the doors. And it has taken all this time, indeed, until just before I came away two weeks ago, it has taken all this time for us, at last, to get some doors back in.

And, you see, we know in our people that something of the same order takes place. They have been under the spirit of bondage and legality since their conception. And purchased by our Lord Jesus Christ and his grace, as they are, it takes the constant application of the influences of Christ's powerful grace to remake them into the image of the child of God who enjoys the liberty of the children of God. And we know from God's Word that such liberty only awaits the day when the bondage of decay under the curse of the law is removed in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And in so many of our people, hidden under so many guises, our pastoral ministry, my brothers, is to seek to remove those deep-seated levels of legal spirit and framework, because they are all like ourselves—men and women and boys and girls, too—who by nature sin, through the law, had closed the mortgage. And even those of us who may be on in life and well acquainted with the covenant of grace, do we not often feel and act as though we were still under a covenant of works to God. We are like those men, those slaves in those days of liberation, old men who all their days had known masters and lords who could not till their dying day believe that they were really free. And our pastoral ministry to Mr. or Mrs. or Miss or Master Legality is to bring them by the grace of God into the liberty of the children of Christ.

“In the best of the children of God here,” says Thomas Boston, “there are such remains of the legal disposition and inclination of heart to the way of the covenant of works that as they are never quite free of it in their very best duties, so at times their services smell so rank of it as if they were alive to the law and dead to Christ.”

My brothers, there are few believers and there will be few among us who are not haunted, if I may say so, by the ghost of our former husband.

And the glory of the psychology of that illustration the apostle Paul uses in Romans 7 is that we are not only those who have been divorced, as it were, from our former husband which brought us under bondage to the law. We are not only divorced in this sense, but we are remarried to a new husband who is able to love us and nourish us and care for us in such a way that day by day as we grow in grace, the haunting specter of the former husband, Legality, increasingly becomes a dim and ancient memory of the past. That is the Savior we have and that is, therefore, the kind of pastors that we need to be.

But that brings us—and we must hurry on—to the fourth point that we examine this morning where we turn together to the pastoral dangers of Legalism.

Let me simply outline these for you as we hurry on. The doctrinal danger of Legalism, obviously, is that it builds up what the gospel has torn down. And that is why Legalism falls under the apostolic anathema. It is another gospel. And even though preached to us by an apostle or an angel from heaven, we need to recognize that it is destructive of the grace of God in Christ. And that, of course, is another reason why Legalism lies at the very heart of many pastoral problems and is one of the chief spiritual sicknesses that we need to treat. Many of the blessings that Christians down through the years have experienced and described in a whole multitude of ways have been quite simply that by the grace of God they are being delivered from a legal framework by the Word and the Spirit of God. And so it is of great importance for us to recognize some of the maladies that Legalism produces. And, again, there is time for us—if there is even time for us—to mention only three.

In the first place, Legalism produces a self righteous temper. That, of course, again, discloses itself in many ways, some more straightforward than others. It is the Spirit, of course, of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable. But he was a man deeply exercised in holiness. His outward conduct was apparently impeccable in the works of religion. He excelled others. He had a zeal for the law and its application. And it is only really in the light of the tax collector's impassioned plea for free propitiation that the Pharisee's prayer can be seen in its true light. And yet how often that same self righteous temper is formed in the lives of believers by comparison with others.

“I thank God I am not like that believer.”

The same spirit of legality and the self righteousness of the elder brother in the parable of our Lord that only shows itself in the light of the exposure of free grace. Something of it, apparently, remaining in the believers in that parable of the laborers in the vineyard who all received the same reward although some had borne more of the burden in the heat of the day than others.

And you remember how Matthew tells us the characteristic words they murmured against their fellows.

Beloved, that kind of murmuring against their fellows in our fellowships is very often a

sign of that self righteous temper that has legality at its root, the mentality that speaks or doesn't speak of us and them that is so destructive of our fellowship, the legality that is sometimes—God help us—disguised as zeal for justice and truth and even as a concern for Church discipline. But at the end of the day there is an unwillingness to welcome those whom Christ welcomes and not to disputings. It is a temper that finds its source in a heart that has never really been delivered and mastered by God's free grace.

Let me quote Colquhoun to you again, if I may.

“When a man is driven to acts of obedience by the dread of God's wrath revealed in the law and not drawn to them by the belief of his love revealed in the gospel, when he fears God because of his power and justice and not because of his goodness, when he regards God more as an avenging judge than as a compassionate friend and father, and when, as infinite in grace and mercy, he flees from him, he shows that he is under the dominion or at least under the prevalence of a legal spirit. If he builds his faith of the pardon of sin, of the favor of God, of eternal life upon any graces which he supposes are implanted in him or upon any duties which are performed by him, he is evidently under the power of a self righteous temper. He shows that he is under the influence of this hateful temper by grounding his hope and his comfort upon conditions performed by himself and not upon the gracious and absolute promises of the gospel, in a word, when his hope of divine mercy is raised by the liveliness of his frame and duties and not by discoveries of the freeness and riches of redeeming grace offered to him in the gospel.”

So Legalism reveals itself in a self righteous frame. Legalism, consequently, produces a bondage spirit. You remember how the apostle travailed to bring the Galatians to full birth in Christ and emphasizes in that marvelous passage, Galatians 4:1-11, the grace of Christ that is able to set us free from the spirit of bondage. And yet, as you know, the Galatian spirit is a spirit that is so often evident among us.

Do you remember how in *Pilgrim's Progress*, if I may resurrect John Bunyan again, how poor Faithful fell and was assaulted, as you recall, by Adam the first.

“I looked behind me and saw one coming after me swift as the wind. So he overtook me just about the place where the settle stands. So soon as the man overtook me he was but a word and a blow for down he knocked me and laid me for dead. But when I was a little come to myself again, I asked him wherefore he served me so? He said, Because of my secret inclining to Adam the First: and with that he struck me another deadly blow on the breast, and beat me down backward, so I lay at his foot as dead as before. So when I came to myself again I cried him mercy; but he said, I know not how to shew mercy; and with that knocked me down again. He had doubtless made an end of me, but that one came by, and bid him forbear?

“Christian: Who was that that bid him forbear?

“Faithful: I did not know him at first, but as he went by, I perceived the holes in his hands and in his side; then I concluded that he was our Lord. So I went up the Hill.

“Christian: That man that overtook you was Moses: He spareth none, neither knoweth he how to shew mercy to those that transgress his Law.”

The secret inclining to Adam the first, to our first husband in terms of Romans 7:1-6 that brings us again into the bondage frame of spirit and we, brethren, like these Marrow Men need to come to such and show them that it is only through the free, patient, loving grace of their second husband, the second man, the Last Adam, that they can ever be delivered from a bondage frame of spirit.

And, you know, this is really why the *Marrow of Modern Divinity* was written. Listen to its author giving his personal testimony.

“Though at last by means of conferring with Mr. Thomas Hooker in private, the Lord was pleased to convince me that I was yet but a proud Pharisee, and to show me the way of faith and salvation by Christ alone, and to give me, I hope, a heart in some measure to embrace it; yet, alas! through the weakness of my faith, I have been, and still am apt to turn aside to the covenant of works; and therefore have not attained to that joy and peace in believing, nor that measure of love to Christ, and to man for Christ's sake, as I am confident many of God's saints do attain unto in the time of this life. The Lord be merciful to me and increase my faith.”

And, therefore, in the first place, Legalism and a legal frame in the believer makes the believer a prey to Satan.

Perhaps Bunyan was right to say that it was Moses who beat Faithful for his secret inclining to Adam the first, but, of course, ultimately it is Satan who does so. For the legal spirit is the landing ground which Satan seeks. It provides the fulcrum he needs to lever his way into our hearts, to use the law as the strength of sin in his murky paw and then to twist our minds in rebellion against God.

Isn't this how he operated in the Garden of Eden? Isn't this how he has been operating ever since, driving us back to the law as a works covenant, pressing upon us our sin, confirming in us our worst legal fears about our relationship to God, blackmailing us into further bondage in our Legalism, lest the wrath of God descend upon us so that he has got us in his grip and has utterly distorted in our hearts what we once knew of the pulse beat of the free grace of God in the gospel?

And so, again, writes Thomas Boston:

“While the law retains its power, its dominion, over a man, death has its sting, and sin its strength against him; but if once he is dead to the law and wholly and altogether set free from it, as it is the covenant of works; then sin hath lost its strength, death its sting, and Satan his plea against him.”

And there is not a man among us who is a true child of God who doesn't know the voice of the evil one saying, "Look, you have sinned. You have broken God's law. You are under condemnation. You are not good enough to be a believer, far less to be a pastor."

Beloved, what is our refuge? Our refuge is our confession that there is nothing good dwells in us, but we fly to Jesus our shield and our defender in the covenant of grace. We do not trust in the covenant of works for our salvation, but in Christ and Christ alone. And in Christ we are safe and free and enjoy the liberty of the children of God.

Yes, bowed down beneath a load of sin, by Satan sorely pressed, by war without and fears within, yes. I come to thee for rest. Be Thou my shield and hiding place, that shelter near Thy side. I may my fierce accuser face and tell him, "Christ has died."

There and there alone is liberty from bondage. And that brings us, in a word, to the fifth consideration which is the remedy for Legalism. And the remedy for Legalism need I say to you, my dear brethren, is grace, grace, grace. The legal-spirited believer must be persuaded by the word in our preaching and pastoral counseling and in what lay by the power of the Holy Spirit that his Lord Jesus Christ is more full of grace than he can ever be of sin.

We must teach him to come and say, "Oh, Jesus, full of pardoning grace, more full of grace than I of sin." He must be taught that even where the law came in by the side door to increase the trespass, grace has abounded all the more. He must learn, as we seek to learn in our own hearts, that where sin has abounded, grace has super abounded. And where the law came, grace reigns. And at the end of the day this means that as pastors of the flock of God, we must labor to persuade people of the grace of God himself towards them and, therefore, of the grace of law to those who have faith and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation. Indeed, we may go to that Pauline extreme and prove from holy Scripture exegetically in an expository, in a doctrinal, in a biographical, in an spiritual, and in an experimental form that where sin has abounded in this world, God's grace has abounded all the more. Yes, the more sin there has been, the more grace.

It will be said to us that such free grace will lead people to conclude, "Let us go on sinning that grace may abound." But that, indeed, may be the supreme index and indicator that it is free grace that we are preaching. And if it is free grace that we are preaching, Antinomianism can never be its fruit as, God willing, tomorrow we will see.

Let us all pray.

Our heavenly Father, we are glad to confess together in your presence, as men set apart for the ministry of the gospel, that we are but children in our thinking and children in our experience. We are at times the objects of varying degrees of joy and peace and bondage and sorrow. We confess those seasons in our lives when we have been no longer sure whether we are returned prodigals or legalistic elder brothers. And yet in your grace you have stood before us. You have wept over us. You have sent true pastors of the soul to us in word and in deed and on the written page. You have sent him who supremely is

the pastor and counselor, our Lord Jesus Christ, by his Spirit, to persuade us inwardly. And you have made that blessed Spirit to us not the spirit of bondage to bring us to fear, but the spirit of adoption whereby we cry, "Abba, Father," but we come to you this day confessing our utter unworthiness and inability to be pastors of the flock, to be surgeons of the maladies of men's souls. And we pray that, our blessed Lord, that that in our thinking which has locked in to our needs, to our situations and to the gracious promptings of your Spirit for our future ministry may be wonderfully honored by your Spirit and sealed in all our hearts. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.