

Legalism, Law, and Love

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Introduction

Is obedience to Christ optional or unnecessary? Are belief in and love of Christ the only things required of sinners to be saved? Some (the *we-are-not-under-law-but-under-grace* crowd) would have it so and thus teach. To them the New Testament is but a collection of "love letters" from God that are bereft of any authoritative or "legal" content. Who would even consider denying that the New Testament, with its incomparable glad tidings of salvation for sinners, is the revelation of the incomparable (and all but incomprehensible) love of God and His son for fallen man? Having said this, it is nonetheless utter folly to deny that this New Testament "love story" is also God's law for all men, for all time, since Calvary.

Paul recognized the existence of "the law of Christ" and even identified one of its precepts (Gal. 6:1-2). He knew that he was "under law to Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21), which he elsewhere described as "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:2). James twice referred to the New Testament as the "law of liberty" (Jam. 1:25; 2:12). Besides these explicit statements, there are numerous implicit statements and principles that demand the conclusion that (1) the New Testament of Christ is God's law for the Christian Age and (2) that all men are amenable to it.

Are We "Legalists"?

The liberals, who do not want to be bound by Divine law (i.e., the New Testament), often hurl *legalist* into the teeth of those of us who emphasize obedience to New Testament commands. We will do well to examine this term and the accusation made concerning it. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines legalism as "a strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code." Webster notwithstanding, I question the possibility of "excessive conformity" to Divine law (the expression has almost a pejorative connotation). "Strict, literal...conformity" to His will is exactly what the Lord requires of those who would be saved (Mat. 7:21-23; Heb. 5:9; et al.).

Men who specialize in taking liberties with God's Word (i.e., liberals) actually pay us a compliment when they call us, by at least part of Webster's definition, "legalists." First, to be a legalist implies belief in the existence of law. I freely confess my conviction that the New Testament is the Divine law under which we live and which will be the final standard of our

judgment (John 12:48). Second, I am quite willing to "plead guilty" to insisting upon a strict adherence to that law.

Perhaps what the accusers hope to do by calling us "legalists" is to class us with the first-century scribes and Pharisees. Most certainly, the Master scathingly rebuked them on more than one occasion, but did He ever rebuke them for "strict conformity" to God's law? No – not once! Rather, He chided them for elevating human opinion, precept, and tradition to the level of Divine law, thus making their own religious law (Mat. 15:3, 6-9). Further, He condemned them for overemphasizing parts of God's law while utterly rejecting and/or neglecting other parts of it (23:23), which also had the effect of creating their own laws. Liberals who refuse to be bound by God's law (or even deny its existence) fits the behavior of those first-century enemies of the Lord much better. Thus the modern counterparts of the ancient scribes and Pharisees are not those who insist upon strict adherence to Divine law (i.e., "legalists"). Today's liberals match up with them very well in their contempt for God's law. As did the Christ, so should we condemn and expose them.

"Legalism" and Obedience

Does calling for strict adherence/obedience to Divine law constitute "legalism," per the charge of liberals? There is no clearer principle in the entire Bible than this: Man's paramount duty is to obey God. In much of his life, Solomon miserably failed to honor the pivotal conclusion he finally reached, but it remains nonetheless true: "This is the end of the matter; all hath been heard: fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecc. 12:13). King Saul "learned the hard way" that an outward show of religion in offerings and sacrifices is no substitute for obedience. Samuel sharply reproved him with words that ring true right down to our time:

Hath Jehovah as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of Jehovah? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. (1 Sam. 15:22).

On the other hand, from the beginning, disobedience of God's law has been synonymous with sin – and it still is. The disobedience of Eve, and then Adam, was the very vehicle upon which sin entered the world (Rom. 5:12, 19). The penalty of physical death came upon mankind because of sin (v. 12). Even worse, the perfect holiness of God demanded (and demands) the sentence of eternal spiritual death – separation from God in Hell – for sinful men: "For the wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (6:23). Sin

and disobedience are synonyms, hence it should – and does – make perfect sense to substitute disobedience for sin in the foregoing passage: "The wages of disobedience is death." The fact that disobedience results in damnation further emphasizes the necessity of obedience.

Ever-Present Divine Law or Universalism?

There has never been a time when man was not accountable to a law system from God. The concepts of sin and law are inseparably bound up together (no law, no sin [Rom. 4:15]; no sin, no law [5:13]). "All have sinned" from the very beginning (3:23a; cf. 5:13–14), therefore all have been under some system of Divine law from the beginning. Moreover, all continue to "fall short" (3:23b). [Note: *have sinned* is an aorist tense form, referring to past completed action, while *fall short* is a present tense form, indicating present and continuing action.] Only if mankind has always been (and ever will be) under law from God can it be said that men have always been (and ever will be) sinners. It is impossible to conceive of sin in the absence of law. As unspiritual as King Saul was, he recognized this constant principle in his statement to Samuel: "I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of Jehovah" (1 Sam. 15:24). John succinctly expressed this principle that has no exceptions: "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4, KJV; cf. 5:17). If, as some now allege, men are no longer under law to God, what shall we conclude about sin? What a heinous chain of heresy such antinomian thinking begets, including the following links:

- The only ones whom the death of Christ benefited were those who lived before Calvary.
- God simply abrogated the law systems He had formerly enacted and did not replace them with another.
- It is therefore impossible for anyone living in the Christian Age to sin.
- Hence, the death of Christ was unnecessary and inapplicable with respect to those who have lived since that event.

In the absence of sin there is no condemnation. Thus those who argue that grace in the Christian Age frees us from Divine law imply that, since the cross, the egregious doctrine of unconditional universalism has been in effect. Liberals must face the fact that it is impossible to disobey nonexistent law.

Rather than being free from condemnation by the **absence** of law (per the liberals), we are actually freed from it by the **power** of law. That which Paul said was true concerning himself is true of all: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2). We correctly identify this law with "the truth" which makes us

free (John 8:32; cf. 17:17) and the "perfect law of liberty" (Jam. 1:25; cf. 2:12). It is sad, but true, that the Lord will render His vengeance to those who know not God, and to those who obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus: who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might (2 The. 1:7-9).

What About Love?

If *love* (see opening paragraph) is Scripturally defined, then, indeed love of Christ is all that is required of sinners for salvation. Alas, liberals do not seem to comprehend its Scriptural meaning. Where is the liberal who knows (or who will acknowledge) the inseparable connection between loving and obeying the Christ? To the liberal, *love of Christ* appears to have more to do with shadow and symbol than with substance. It often involves such things as getting emotionally worked up, shouting "praise the Lord," fluttering raised hands, or maybe singing loudly some "contemporary Christian song" about loving God or His Son. (Lest I be misunderstood, I am not saying we should not be emotionally involved in our worship, that it is wrong to utter the phrase, *praise the Lord*, or that the singing of newer songs [assuming they are Scriptural] is somehow inherently unscriptural.) Yet the Bible is explicit and clear in its declaration of this love-obedience union.

The Bible goes far beyond mere symbols, emotions, and words—all of which can be very fickle and deceitful—as indicators of love for the Lord. Love for Christ brings us right back to the Bible emphasis on obedience to Divine **law**. According to Christ Himself, our obedience to Christ is the expression and proof of genuine love for Him:

If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments.... He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him.... He that loveth me not keepeth not my words: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me.... If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love (John 14:15, 21, 24; 15:10).

John states that the same standard of proof applies to one's love for the Father: "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous" (1 John 5:3). If love of one another requires more than mere verbal expression, how much more does the love of God and His Son (3:18). In light of the passages above, one must conclude that there is no way to demonstrate genuine love for the Son of God except by obedience to Him.

Conclusion

Those who insist that we are under no system of Divine law since the cross or that it is somehow "unspiritual" to emphasize "commandment-keeping" and obedience under Christ are not lovers of Christ—by His own definition. Plainly put, careful obedience to Christ **does not** constitute "legalism" as defined by liberals, equating it with the behavior of the scribes and Pharisees. On the other hand, careful obedience to Christ **does** constitute "legalism" as defined by the dictionary: "strict, literal conformity to the law." Therefore, by dictionary definition, **"legalism" is a valid synonym for Biblical love.**

The old Priscilla Owens hymn, "Give Me the Bible," has had it just right all along: "Precept and promise, law and love combining." There is the beautiful Scriptural balance of law, love, and obedience. May we never allow ourselves to be intimidated by the liberals' charge of "legalism" just because we insist that men must obey the commandments—the law—of Christ.

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