



LEGALISM AND LICENSE¹

Legalism and License are two distortions of the gospel and of Christian living. We seek here to summarize them and to offer a mediating, gospel-centered, and balanced view of Christian living.

I. THE BACKGROUND OF THE TERMS

To understand legalism and license we must first say a little about the types of law mentioned in Scripture. Historically, Bible scholars and theologians have discerned three types of law:

- (i) *Civic/judicial law*. This passed away with the ending of Israel's theocracy.
- (ii) *Ceremonial law*. This was fulfilled in Christ. Whereas the law was the "type", Christ is the "antitype". Cf., Acts 15, Gal. 3-5; Col. 2:16.
- (iii) *Moral law/Decalogue*. This has ongoing relevance as a rule of life (Ex. 20:1-17; Matt. 5:17-20; Eph. 6:1-3; James 2: 8, 11-12).

Since the law is, in the words of Paul, holy, just, good and spiritual (Rom. 7:12, 14), neither license nor legalism should make us think less of the law of God. The source of the distortions of legalism and license lie with us, with our lopsided understanding and/or appropriation of the teaching of Scripture, leading us to make either too much of the law *vis à vis* grace, or too little of it.

II. THE DEFINING OF THE TERMS

Legalism.

Legalism exalts the law of God above his grace. It distorts the gospel (by telling us we can earn our own salvation) and/or the life we are to live in Christ. It does so by:

- (i) Emphasizing the letter of the law at the expense of its spirit (Matt. 12:1-14; 22:34-40).
- (ii) Adding to God's law.

¹ The following are the notes of a Sunday School class taught in 2006.

- (iii) Majoring on the minors (Matt. 23:23-24).

License.

As "a blasphemous impiety" (Luther) and "one of the most subtle, dangerous heresies" (Martyn Lloyd-Jones), license or lawlessness denies the significance of God's law (Antinomianism). There is a rhyme which sums up the licentious spirit:

Freed from the law, O blessed condition;
 I can sin all I want and still have remission!

This thinking is not new. Paul answers it in Romans 6-7). License, says Theodore Beza is "the Devil's logic." It arises from dangerous error that Christians are no longer obligated to the moral law (Jn. 1:17; Jn. 14:15; Rom. 3:31), and from a confusion of sanctification with justification. Recall, though, the reformers' mantra: "We are justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone." The chief flaw of licentiousness is that it sets love in opposition to law.

III. THE IDENTIFYING OF THE PROBLEMS

Legalism.

The legalist tends towards or is blatantly—

- (i) Self-reliant/proud: We think we can keep the law unto salvation.
- (ii) Unaware: We know neither God's holiness nor our sinfulness.
- (iii) Tyrannical/judgmental. Legalists quickly become little Pharisees or "Gospel hypocrites".

License.

The licentious tend toward or are blatantly—

- (i) Cheap: They reduce the value of grace ("Let us sin that grace may abound" [Rom. 6:1]).
- (ii) Sinful: They tolerate not only "respectable" sins as does the legalist, but scandalous sins.



(iv) Self-defeating: Instead of promoting freedom from sin, by promoting freedom in sin licentious actually facilitates a furthering in sin.

In their varying ways, both legalism and license dishonor God, weaken the church, and harm both the distorted and those around them.

IV. THE DEPICTION OF THE SOLUTION

Between legalism and license stands the biblical advocacy and balance of Christian liberty. As the mediating position, Christian liberty is the antidote to both legalism and license. Four main points may be made in regard to Christian liberty:

First point: Christian freedom is real.

The liberty Christ has won for us makes us genuinely free to pursue holiness. Galatians 5:1: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Cf., Romans 8:15.

Second point: Christian freedom is responsible.

While Christ is Lord of our conscience, we are not to use the freedom his Lordship affords to be a stumbling block to his weaker people, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Third point: Christian freedom is structured.

Christian liberty is not based on subjective impressions of what is appropriate or inappropriate. Rather the law shapes our freedom. After all, there is no liberty in anarchy. We keep the law, then, only now we do so because we have the Spirit’s enabling and motivation to do so. He grants the people of God both the power and desire to do so (Ps. 110:3; 2 Pet. 1:3). States Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “If the ‘grace’ you have received does not help you to keep the law, you have not received grace.” Thus, contrary to legalism and license, Christian liberty co-ordinates love and

law. We express our love for God and our response to his grace by revering God’s law.

Fourth point: Christian freedom is Christ-centered.

The holiness we pursue is not a “dos” and “don’ts” approach to the law, but at its core is a delight in following Christ. We are, literally, in law to Christ (1 Cor. 9:22). Christ is our example of what it means to please and to obey the Father. While Christ’s example has no relevance to our justification, it is one means given us for our sanctification. By keeping our eyes on the Savior we are helped, in the words of J. I. Packer, “to keep the law non-legalistically” (that is to say, from life rather than for life). In Christ, we see the one person who kept the law of God perfectly in its details, and with nothing less than full joy in his Father. Thus, the Christ whose example we follow was neither legalist nor licentious. His obedience was willing and joyful, and his freedom was obedient and God-honoring.

Conclusion

In pursuing the reflection of Christ, we learn, in the words of J. I. Packer, that “Law is needed as love’s eyes [and] love is needed as law’s heartbeat. Law without love is Pharisaism [but] love without law is Antinomianism.” (Alderson, *No Holiness, No Heaven!* 29).

Further reading:

Richard Alderson, *No Holiness, No Heaven!*, (Edinburgh and Carlisle PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986).

R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith: 100 Key Doctrines in Plain Language* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1998), chs. 90–91.

More recently, Sinclair B. Ferguson has written a significant treatment of this subject, titled *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2016).