

# Legalism and Antinomianism

The terms “legalism” and “antinomianism” are much bandied about in so-called “Reformed” or “Sovereign Grace” churches today. Accusations of legalism or antinomianism are hurled back and forth between churches who claim to believe the doctrines of grace, and in many instances they are cause for church splits and disfellowship between churches. As those who have read articles by the present writer know, this article will not be a plea for all these churches and people to “just get along.” Hopefully, it will be a helpful explanation of what legalism and antinomianism are and what they are not, along with conclusions that can be drawn from each.

## What the Law Is

The words “legalism” and “antinomianism” both contain roots (*legis, nomos*) that have to do with *law*. Legalism could be said to be *law-ism*, while antinomianism could be said to be *anti-law-ism*. To begin to understand what these two terms mean, we need a basic understanding of what the *law* is that is in question. A law is a set of rules of conduct or action. For professing Christians, the law is made up of the set of rules of conduct or action put forth in the Bible. The law is sometimes called “commands” or “commandments.” God’s commands make up His law. The question then inevitably arises, “Which commands? Every command in the entire Bible?” The Bible makes it very clear that there were certain commands from God that are found in the Old Testament that have been abrogated because they were types of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 3, Colossians 2:16-23, Hebrews 7-10). For example, although the commands to kill animals for sacrifices were made by God to Israel in the Old Testament, these commands are abrogated by the coming of Christ, who was The Sacrifice that abolished all animal sacrifices.

## What Legalism Is

Legalism is the obeying of God’s commands in order to obtain salvation, maintain salvation, and/or entitle a person to final glory. Legalists believe that it is their law-keeping that gets and keeps them in favor with God. A simple way to put it is that they believe in salvation conditioned on the sinner. A prime example of legalism is given in Romans 9:30-33:

*“What then shall we say? That [the] nations not following after righteousness have taken on righteousness, but a righteousness of faith; but Israel following after a law of righteousness did not arrive at a law of righteousness? Why? Because [it was] not of faith, but as of works of Law. For they stumbled at the Stone-of-stumbling, as it has been written, ‘Behold, I place in Zion a Stone-of-stumbling, and a Rock-of-offense, and everyone believing on Him will not be put to shame.’”*

Israel thought that their righteousness came from their law-keeping. Notice that they *followed after a law of righteousness*. They were doing their best to keep all of God’s commandments. Paul was not talking about the immoral perverts. He was talking about those who strove to keep the law, just as Paul himself, before he was converted, was a moral man who kept the law (see Philippians 3). Yet all of their law-keeping was an abomination to God, because they believed

that their salvation was conditioned on their law-keeping. They stumbled at Jesus Christ, because *“Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believes” (Romans 10:4)*. They were offended at the truth that their law-keeping had absolutely nothing to do with the righteousness that God requires as to the ground of salvation.

Christ as the end of the law for righteousness offends natural man. Natural man believes that his works are what bring him into favor with God, sanctify him, and make the ultimate difference between heaven and hell. Natural man believes that on judgment day, God will bring him to heaven because of his obedience. Natural man judges others to be saved based on their obedience to the law. Natural man is a legalist. And when natural man “gets religion,” he goes from being an irreligious legalist to being a religious legalist. He will talk about his great transformation of character and conduct as being sure evidence that he is born again. He will have a zeal to God. But that “zeal to God” is *“not according to knowledge” (Romans 10:2)*. What is that knowledge of which these zealous religious legalists are ignorant? They are *“ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, they did not submit to the righteousness of God” (Romans 10:3)*. They go about zealously obeying God’s commands, all the while being ignorant of the fact that *“Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believes” (Romans 10:4)*. They do not believe that it is the *imputed righteousness of Christ* that is the only righteousness God accepts as to the ground of salvation.

Legalism comes in many colors. Some legalists believe that Jesus Christ died for everyone without exception. How is this legalism? It is legalism in that they believe that it is the work of the sinner, not the work of Christ, that makes the ultimate difference between heaven and hell. Some legalists who claim to believe in sovereign grace believe that their salvation is conditioned on what the Holy Spirit enables them to do. They say that the Holy Spirit enables them to obey God’s law, and obedience is what keeps them saved or entitles them to heaven. Some legalists will create their own traditions and then say that those who do not follow those traditions are out of favor with God.

The Bible clearly opposes legalism: *“Because by works of law not one of all flesh will be justified before Him ... Then we conclude a man to be justified by faith without works of law” (Romans 3:20-28)*. *“So that, my brothers, you also were made dead to the law through the body of Christ, for you to become Another’s, to [One] raised from [the] dead ... (Romans 7:4)*. *“But if by grace, no longer [is it] of works; else grace no longer becomes grace. But if of works, it is no longer grace; else work is no longer work” (Romans 11:6)*. *“not by works in righteousness which we had done, but according to His mercy, He saved us through [the] washing of regeneration and renewal of [the] Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5)*. *“For as many as are out of works of law, [these] are under a curse. For it has been written, ‘Cursed [is] everyone who does not continue in all the things having been written in the book of the Law, to do them.’ And that no one is justified by law before God [is] clear because, ‘The just shall live by faith.’ ... For if a law had been given which had been able to make alive, indeed righteousness would have been out of law” (Galatians 3:10-21)*. *“Behold, I, Paul, say to you that if you are circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man being circumcised, that he is a debtor to do*

*all the Law, you who are justified by law are deprived from all effect from Christ, you fell from grace” (Galatians 5:2-5).*

Legalism is deadly. There is not a single regenerate legalist. When someone accuses someone else of being a legalist, that one is saying that the other is lost.

### What Legalism is Not

Legalism is *not* any desire or effort to obey God’s law. A person who says that God’s law is a Christian’s rule of life is *not* necessarily a legalist. Legalism *is* any desire or effort to obey God’s law that springs from a belief that this obedience forms at least some part of the ground of salvation or acceptance before God. If one desires and strives to obey God’s law and does not believe that this obedience forms any part of the ground of his salvation or acceptance before God, then we cannot call this legalism. Many ignorant religionists will be quick to call someone a legalist who strives to strictly obey what God puts forth in His Word. For example, those of us who believe that in corporate worship we are to only sing from the Book of Praises (otherwise known as the Psalms) and women are to wear head coverings are sometimes accused of being legalists. The same goes for those of us who have strict standards of modest clothing and speech, who do not watch television or movies that involve sex, sexual innuendo, violence, etc., who espouse father-directed courtship rather than the worldly dating system, etc. Our desire to strictly conform to God’s commands is seen by the ignorant as legalism. Yet we who believe the gospel do *none* of this out of a belief that *any* of these things forms *any* part of the ground of our salvation or of our acceptance before God or of our entitlement to heaven. We do these out of love for the God who has given us all of salvation, from regeneration to final glory, based not on our law-keeping but on the atoning blood and imputed righteousness of Christ alone.

### What Antinomianism Is

Antinomianism is the belief that Christians are not to use God’s law – God’s commands – as a rule of life. Antinomians also come in many different colors. Some will say, “I don’t keep any law, I just love.” Some will say, “My only regulation is God’s grace.” Some will say, “The Holy Spirit is my guide for good works, not the law.” Some will say, “Away with the law!” Some will even go so far as to say that they hate the law.

Scripture clearly opposes this kind of thinking. Although we are not under the law as to the ground of our salvation, we are commanded to show our love to God by obeying His commands. And God does not leave us in the dark as to what His commands are; He reveals them to us in His Word, so that we might know what the good works are that show our love to Him. The following is one passage of Scripture (out of many) that reveals the law of God:

*“Therefore, putting off the false, speak truth each with his neighbor, because we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the Devil. The one stealing, let him steal no more, but rather let him labor, working what is*

*good with the hands, that he may have [something] to give to the [one] that has need. Let not any filthy word go out of your mouth, but if any [is] good to building up [in respect to] the need, that it may give grace to the ones hearing. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed to the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and anger, and wrath, and tumult, and evil speaking be put away from you, along with all evil things. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, having forgiven one another, even as also God forgave you in Christ. ... But let not fornication, and all uncleanness, or greediness, be named among you, as is fitting for saints; also baseness, and foolish talking, or joking (the things not becoming), but rather thanksgiving. ... And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even reprove [them]. For it is shameful even to speak of the things being done by them in secret. ... And do not be drunk with wine, in which is debauchery, but be filled by the Spirit, speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and praising in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks at all times for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, even to God [the] Father ... Wives, subject yourselves to your own husbands, as to the Lord, because a husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is Head of the assembly, and He is [the] Savior of the body. But even as the assembly is subject to Christ, so also the wives to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the assembly and gave Himself up on its behalf ... However, you also, everyone, let each [one] love his wife as himself, and the wife, that she give deference to the husband. Children, obey your parents in [the] Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother, which is [the] first commandment with a promise, that it may be well with you, and you may be long-lived on the earth. And fathers, do not provoke your children, but nurture them in [the] discipline and admonition of [the] Lord” (Ephesians 4:25-6:4).*

Now if these are not *commands* given from *God* that we are to *obey*, what are they? Are they suggestions? Are they options? Is it a take-it-or-leave-it deal?

Notice that when the Holy Spirit through Paul commands children to honor their parents by obeying them, He uses the fifth commandment to assert the point. This in and of itself shows that the Ten Commandments are still commandments for the New Testament church.

There are some who say that the people of God in the New Testament, as opposed to the people of God in the Old Testament, are no longer under law but under grace. These antinomians are advocating the damnable heresy that salvation was by works in the Old Testament and is now by grace in the New Testament. The truth is that salvation has *always* been by grace and that all the saints, from the beginning of the world until Christ’s second coming, believe the gospel of God’s promise to save His people conditioned on the atoning blood and imputed righteousness of Christ alone.

Some questions to ask antinomians are these: When the Old Testament saints strove to keep God’s law, were they legalists? When they said that they loved God’s law and that God’s law was their guide, were they legalists? If they answer anything like, “That’s when God’s people were under the law, and now God’s people are free from the law, so they no longer are required

to obey the law for salvation,” they are saying that the Old Testament saints were required to obey God’s law for salvation. This is damnable.

Not only does God command His people to do certain things and abstain from certain things, He also says that those who have no regard for God’s law are unregenerate. Here is an example:

*“Or do you not know that unjust ones will not inherit [the] kingdom of God? Do not be led astray, neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor abusers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous ones, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor plunderers shall inherit [the] kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).*

An antinomian would say, “All Christians are adulterers and idolaters and thieves. The only difference between us and the unregenerate adulterers and idolaters and thieves is that we have the imputed righteousness of Christ and they do not.” They deny that a Christian’s life cannot be characterized by a disregard for God’s law. The truth is that although a Christian may fall into sin, his life is not characterized by a disregard of God’s law. Christians *do* have a way of conduct that is *different* than the way of conduct of the immoral. But this needs to be made very clear as well: true Christians *do not* say that everyone whose life is characterized by morality is regenerate. In fact, *most* whose lives are characterized by morality, even those who profess to be Christians, are unregenerate. A professing Christian who is morally upright, sincere, and dedicated, but who believes that Jesus Christ died for everyone without exception, is just as unregenerate as the most vile pervert on the face of the earth. This is important to remember. All Christians live lives that are characterized by morality, but not all whose lives are characterized by morality are Christians. Muslims and Mormons are, in general, very moral people, but they believe in a false gospel.

God also tells us this: *“And by this we know that we have known Him, if we keep His commands. The [one] saying, I have known Him, and not keeping His commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that one. But whoever keeps His word, truly in this one the love of God has been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him” (1 John 2:3-5)*

Antinomians stumble over this verse or try to explain it away. But the truth remains. We who are Christians show our love to God by our obedience to His commands, and we know that we love Him if we keep His commands. Does this mean that only those who never sin are the ones who truly love Him? By no means. Christians do sin; in fact, we are constantly falling short of the glory of God. Does this mean that our assurance is based on our works? By no means. Our assurance is based solely on the atoning blood and imputed righteousness of Christ. All Christians are thus assured, and out of this assurance, all Christians will do good works out of love. The one who claims to believe that Christ’s righteousness is the only ground of his salvation but who has no regard for God’s law does not truly love Christ. This is clearly shown in James 2:14-24:

*“My brothers, what [is] the gain if anyone says he has faith, but he does not have works? Is*

*faith able to save him? But if a brother or a sister is naked and may be lacking in daily food, and any one of you say to them, Go in peace, be warmed and filled, but does not give them the things the body needs, what gain [is it]? So also faith, if it does not have works, is dead being by itself.”*

### What Antinomianism Is Not

Antinomianism is *not* the belief that once a person is saved, he is always saved, no matter what he does. It is absolutely true that once a person is saved, *nothing he does* can bring him back under condemnation. Ignorant religionists will say that this is a license to sin. But the opposite of this – that what a regenerate person does can bring him back under condemnation – is nothing more than legalism. If what a person does can bring him back under condemnation, then what a person does can bring him out of condemnation as well. This is the lie of salvation conditioned on the sinner.

Also, a person who says that he does not observe the Sabbath Day is *not* necessarily an antinomian. Our assembly believes that the Sabbath Day was a shadow of Christ, and when the fulness came, the shadow passed away, and just as we are not to go back to the sacrifices that typified Christ, we are not to go back to the day that typified Christ. But we also believe that the fourth commandment is not abrogated but modified, as Hebrews 4 shows. We believe that there is still a sabbath rest for the people of God (v. 9), and that is the rest from our works – the rest in Christ. We are commanded to obey this. We are no more antinomians than the ones who do not follow the Old Testament commands to sacrifice animals.

### What the Right Path Is

God’s Word shows us His Way, and it is not the way of legalism or antinomianism. There are several passages of Scripture that encapsulate the True Way of justification without works and the necessity of good works.

*“The [one] saying to rest in Him ought so to walk as that [One] walked” (1 John 2:6).* Here is both *resting* and *walking*. We are to rest in the atoning blood and imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ alone as our only ground of acceptance before God, and we are to strive to walk as Jesus walked, not to be accepted before God, but to show our love for the God who has secured our salvation.

*“However, the foundation of God stands firm, having this seal, ‘The Lord knew those being His;’ also, ‘Let everyone naming the name of Christ depart from unrighteousness” (2 Timothy 2:19).* All whom God knows in Christ are sure and certain for heaven, based on the work of Christ alone. Our works form no part of our salvation. And those who confess that Christ is the only ground of their salvation are to flee wickedness.

*“For by grace you are saved, through faith, and this not of yourselves; [it is] the gift of God; not*

*of works, that not anyone should boast; for we are [His] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God before prepared that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).* Our salvation was and is *totally apart* from our works. Our works have *absolutely nothing* to do with our ground of salvation, from regeneration to final glory. It is all of grace, our works *totally excluded*. We are also created in Christ *to do* good works; in fact, God already determined that His people *will* do good works. Thus, someone who *does not* do good works is not of God.

*“What then shall we say? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Let it not be! We who died to sin, how shall we still live in it? ... So also you count yourselves to be truly dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Then do not let sin rule in your mortal bodies, to obey it in its lusts. Neither present your members [as] instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as [one] living from [the] dead, and your members instruments of righteousness to God” (Romans 6:1-13).* We are saved solely by the grace of God in Christ. In Christ we are dead to the guilt and condemnation of sin. Our sin does not separate us from God. But this does not give us a license to sin. In fact, those who are dead to sin through Christ will not live in sin. We are not to use our bodies and minds for wickedness but for righteousness. Our righteous position in Christ does not dissolve our obligation to obey God’s law out of love.

God’s people are not legalists. We do not believe that our obedience of God’s law saves us, keeps us saved, recommends us to God, or entitles us to final glory. We are not under law (Romans 6:14-15; Galatians 5:18), we are dead to the law (Romans 7:4; Galatians 2:19), and we are free from the law (Romans 7:6). Christ is the end of the law for righteousness (Romans 10:4). God’s people are not antinomians. We believe that God gives us His law as a rule for our lives, to show us how we are to show our love for Him. We strive to obey God’s commands in our thoughts and actions out of love for Him. We love and delight in God’s law (Psalm 1:2; 119:97), we do good works (Ephesians 2:10), we pursue holiness in our conduct (1 Peter 1:14-16), and we strive to walk as Christ walked (1 John 2:6). God’s commandments are not burdensome to us (1 John 5:3).

To all the children of God: Rest in the finished work of Christ, and obey God’s commandments.

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