

LEGALISM, LICENSE, AND LIBERTY

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I. Introduction

A. You have heard of the three R's of education: readin', writing, and 'rithmetic. If we do not want to distort the Bible's message of grace, we need to discern between the three L's: legalism, license, and liberty.

B. One of the God talking billboards reads, "Have you read My best seller? There will be a test—God."

C. The legalism test (quotes)

1. "When I get my act together, I will become a Christian."
2. "No condemnation now hangs over the head of those who are 'in' Christ Jesus"
3. "Whosoever doeth right, whether male or female, and is a believer, him verily we shall quicken with good life [resurrect]."
4. "Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ."

5. "All men by the grace of God have the power to gain eternal life. This is called salvation by grace coupled with obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel ... for we know it is by grace that we are saved after all we can do."
6. "The more that I do for God, the more pleased He is with me."
7. "God is going to get you for that!"
8. "But if a man, irrespective of his work, has faith in him who justifies the sinful, then that man's faith is counted as righteousness, and that is the gift of God."
9. "Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing!"
10. "Salvation by grace alone through faith alone is 'easy-believism' or 'cheap-grace'!"
11. "I've got my salvation by faith. Maybe I'll get religious when I'm old but now I just want to have fun!"
12. "A sinner must intend fully to obey the law, as a condition of justification; that, in his purpose and intention, he must forsake all sin; that nothing short of perfection of aim or intention can be accepted of God."
13. "Yes, this must be, if it be true that Christians are justified without present full obedience. That surely must be a doctrine of devils...."

14. "You must make Jesus both Savior and Lord to be saved." "Jesus must be Lord of all or He is not Lord at all."

15. "Jesus paid for all my sins, so why not sin? God will forgive me!"

D. The legalism test (answers)

1. **Legalism.** Cp. Eph 2:1.

2. **Liberty.** Rom 8:1 (NTME).

3. **Legalism.** *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran: An Explanatory Translation by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall*, trans. Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (New York: Times Mirror, n.d.) 16:97. Cp. Rom 4:4–8.

4. **Liberty.** Rom 3:24 (The Message).

5. **Legalism.** B.R. McCorkie, *What The Mormons Think of Christ* (n. b.: A Mormon publication) quoted by Walter R. Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., Publishers, 1974) 193.

6. **Legalism.** Heard around evangelical churches. Cp. "Accepted in the Beloved" (Eph 1:6 KJV).

7. **Legalism.** Heard around evangelical churches. Cp. Rom 8:1.

8. **Liberty.** Rom 4:5 (NTME).

9. **Liberty.** Eph 2:8–9 (The Message).

10. **Legalism.** Heard around evangelical churches. Actually, I believe these to be misquotes from J.I. Packer's *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*. Cp. Rom 3:22–26.

11. **License.** Heard around evangelical churches. Cp. Rom 6:1–14.
12. **Legalism.** Charles G. Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, ed. J.H. Fairchild (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., Publishers, 1976) 57.
Cp. 1 John 1:8–10.
13. **Legalism.** Finney, op. cit. 55. Cp. Rom 3:28; 5:8–10.
14. **Legalism.** Heard around evangelical churches. Cp. Rom 12:1–2.
Lordship is an issue for believers.
15. **License.** Heard around evangelical churches. Cp. Rom 6.

II. The three L's

A. Legalism

1. What it is not

- a. The modern dictionary definition is, "Strict, literal adherence to the law or to a particular code, as of religion or morality" (American Heritage Dictionary). This definition is wrong and falsely labels many as legalists.

b. Being methodical

- i. Early Methodists were called "Methodist" because they were so methodical.
- ii. Navigators
- iii. Daniel prayed three times a day (Dan 6:10).
- iv. Our Lord Jesus consistently worshiped in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16).

- v. There is nothing wrong with living a consistent well-organized methodical life. However, do not think that you are impressing God by doing so.
- c. Being traditional
 - i. God does not care whether one celebrates holidays or keeps kosher. Paul writes, "One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God" (Rom 14:5–6).
 - ii. Paul lived as an observant Jew.
 - 1) For example, Paul kept the feast of Pentecost, called Shavuot in Heb.
 - 2) Luke records that "Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost" (Acts 20:16).
 - iii. However, Paul did not think that his acceptance before God depended on keeping Jewish traditions:

Although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for

the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (Phil 3:4–9).

iv. The same attitude is evident at Baruch Ha Shem Messianic Synagogue.

d. Being obedient

i. Paul rejoiced "for the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil" (Rom 16:19).

ii. Peter writes:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY" (1 Pet 1:14–16).

iii. Obedience is a good thing. Nevertheless, God does not accept us based on our obedience.

1) Paul writes that "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy" (Titus 3:5).

2) Paul writes that "to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Rom 4:5).

2. What it is

- a. An older definition of legalism concerned living "according to the law of works as distinguished from free grace; or resting on works for salvation" (Webster's 1828 Dictionary).
 - i. Seeking to earn acceptance with God in part by good works.
 - ii. Seeking to maintain acceptance with God in part by good works.
- b. Paul writes that believers are to be "to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved" (Eph 1:6 NKJV).
 - i. Not just as accepted as anyone else.
 - ii. Not just as accepted as the Apostle Paul.
 - iii. We are as accepted as God's beloved Son, Jesus is! We cannot improve on that acceptance.

B. License

1. What it is not

- a. Enjoying life
 - i. God should be acknowledged as the Source of the good things that we enjoy, "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy" (1 Tim 6:17).

- ii. The ascetic lifestyle may betray a lack of gratitude or even more serious spiritual problems:

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer (1 Tim 4:1–5).

- iii. This refers, of course, to the proper use of things. Rat poison is useful for killing rats, but I would not want it in my tea!

- b. Refusing to live by a list of do's and don'ts.

- i. Paul warned the Colossians against the futility of lists of do's and don'ts:

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence (Col 2:20–23).

- ii. Three principles

- 1) Does it please God?

- a) Paul writes, "Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him" (2 Cor 5:9).

b) Paul also writes that "you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light ... trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord" (Eph 5:8, 10).

2) Does it express love?

a) Paul writes, "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor" (1 Cor 10:23–24).

b) Paul also writes:

For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles (Rom 14:15–21).

3) Is it OK with my conscience?

a) Paul writes, "The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin" (Rom 14:22–23).

b) Another translation has:

Your personal convictions [on such matters]—exercise [them] as in God's presence, keeping them to yourself [striving only to know the truth and obey His will]. Blessed (happy, to be envied) is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves [who does not convict himself by what he chooses to do]. But the man who has doubts (misgivings, an uneasy conscience) about eating, and then eats [perhaps because of you], stands condemned [before God], because he is not true to his convictions and he does not act from faith. For whatever does not originate and proceed from faith is sin [whatever is done without a conviction of its approval by God is sinful]" (Rom 14:22–23 Amplified).

c. Doing something that is on someone else's list of don'ts

i. God is our Judge, not other people:

But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God (1 Cor 4:3–5).

ii. However, Paul mentions two principles:

1) Does it glorify God?

2) Does it offend people?

3) Paul writes, "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved" (1 Cor 10:31–33).

2. What it is

- a. "Excess of liberty; exorbitant freedom; freedom abused, or used in contempt of law or decorum" (Webster's 1828 Dictionary).
- b. The idea is that, since we are forgiven and assured of eternal life, we can do as we please.
 - i. Paul condemns this idea.
 - 1) He writes, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom 6:1–2).
 - 2) Again, he writes, "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!" (Rom 6:15).
 - ii. However, he does not threaten them with the loss of salvation.
 - iii. Although this is a distortion of the teaching of grace, we can expect to encounter this if we are teaching grace as Paul did.
- c. God intends freedom to be used in loving service, not to satisfy our sinful nature:

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF" (Gal 5:13–14).

C. Liberty

1. What it is not
 - a. Legalism
 - b. License

2. What it is

a. "The condition of being physically and legally free from confinement, servitude, or forced labor.... [... from Latin *libertās*, from *liber*, free.]" (American Heritage Dictionary).

b. Grace alone

i. Paul writes:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Rom 3:21–24).

1) The Gk. word translated "grace" means unmerited "favor

Moreover, the word ... contains the idea of kindness which bestows upon one what he has not deserved."¹

2) Justification must be by God's grace because "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).

3) The Gk. word translated "as a gift" here is translated elsewhere as "without a cause" as in, "THEY HATED ME WITHOUT A CAUSE" (John 15:25).

ii. Grace excludes works.

1) "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Rom 11:6).

2) "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly" (Gal 2:21).

c. Faith alone

i. The Gk. word translated "faith" means "state of believing on the basis of the reliability of the one trusted, *trust, confidence, faith.*"²

1) Not just knowledge of the facts (Lat. *notitia*)

2) Not just assent to a fact (Lat. *assensus*)

3) Actual reliance on the facts (Lat. *fiducia*)

ii. Scriptures

1) Only faith is appropriate for grace, "For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace" (Rom 4:16).

2) "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8–9).

3) Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16 NIV).

4) On another occasion, Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24).

5) In John's gospel, Jesus affirms 98 times that simple trust in Him results in eternal life. Avoid doctrinal legalism.

iii. Faith and Works

1) Paul wrote:

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT" (Rom 4:1–8).

2) James has been misunderstood to conflict with Paul on this:

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead (Jas 2:14–26).

- a) When James is speaking of "dead" faith, he is not speaking of non-existent faith, but of unproductive faith.

- i) The Gk. word translated "save" is not always used in a religious sense. It often means "to preserve or rescue fr[om] natural dangers and afflictions, *save, keep from harm, preserve, rescue.*"³
 - ii) The Gk. word translated "useless" in verse 20 means "being unproductive, *useless, worthless.*"⁴ Note the example in verses 15–16 and the words "Even so" in verse 17.
 - iii) This has been translated, "What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?" (Jas 2:14 NLT).
- b) When James says, "You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas 2:24), he is speaking of justification before men, not God.
- i) The Gk. word translated "justified" means "to render a favorable verdict, *vindicate....* to demonstrate to be morally right, *prove to be right.*"⁵
 - ii) Abraham and Rahab's faith was vindicated or demonstrated by their actions.
 - iii) That is the reason that James says, "show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (Jas 2:18).

iv) That is the reason that Paul writes, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God" (Rom 4:2).

iv. Faith plus anything ruins the reliance on faith.

d. Grace in eclipse

i. Front loading the gospel

1) Repentance

a) The Gk. word translated "repent" simply means "*change one's mind*."⁶ That is, about anything that is keeping you from trusting in Jesus.

b) It does not mean New Year's resolutions not to sin. You cannot fool God with those, anyway.

c) John's gospel was "written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). John never used the word repent.

2) Lordship

a) This is the view that, in addition to faith in Jesus, one must be totally submitted to the lordship of Christ to be saved.

b) Ironically, because these teachers are often proud of their reformation heritage, this is very nearly the Roman Catholic position.

c) Believers should indeed be submitted to the lordship of Jesus Christ. However, it is an issue for believers, not the way that one becomes a believer.

i) Paul writes, "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Rom 12:1).

ii) That makes no sense if the lordship salvation view is correct.

(1) Paul would not have addressed them as "brethren" if they were not submitted.

(2) If they were submitted, there would be no need to writing this to them.

ii. Back loading the gospel

1) The "loose it" crowd

a) These believe that you can be sure that you have salvation now, but you could loose it later.

b) Jesus said that we had "passed out of death into life" (John 5:24).

c) He also said:

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand (John 10:27–29)

- d) Paul writes that he is "convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38–39).
- 2) The "prove it" crowd
 - a) They say that, if one does not persevere in both faith and good works until the end, then you probably were not a believer anyway. You cannot be sure until the very end.
 - b) How is this not adding works to faith?
- 3) Both of these views utterly destroy the believer's assurance of salvation, which should be based on trust in the word of God, not our works.

III. Conclusion

- A. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone plus nothing.
 - 1. Front loading the gospel
 - 2. Back loading the gospel
- B. Legalism, seeking to earn or maintain God's acceptance based even partially on our works, is unbiblical and destructive.
- C. License to sin is a distortion of the gospel of free grace.
- D. Let us use our liberty to serve God!

¹ Thayer, *GELNT* 665–66.

² BDAG 818–20.

³ BDAG 982–83.

⁴ BDAG 128.

⁵ BDAG 249.

⁶ BDAG 640.