

Basic Truth for Young Believers
 Stark Road Gospel Hall
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Liberty, License, and Legalism

Readings: Psalm 119:45; Matthew 23:3-5,23-25; John 8:32-36; Romans 3:31; 8:1-4; Galatians 5:1

The law was given that grace might be sought; grace was given that the law might be fulfilled [Augustine].

1. Liberty

False definitions of liberty: (1) Permission to do what we please, or (2) license to do what is wrong.

Freedom is not autonomy (self-rule). God is sovereign in the universe He has made, and so no creature can be fully autonomous. Our freedom must be subordinate to God's. And besides being under God, we are also under other, lesser authorities: parents, employers, elders, and the state. Any rejection of authority is ultimately rejection of God (Rm 13:1-2).

Any attempt to establish freedom apart from Christianity is doomed because it makes freedom depend on our own ability, which is not enough to sustain it. Christ told the Jews, "If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They were furious at this: "We are descendents of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How is it that You say, 'You will be made free'?" Their answer was ridiculous, of course. For years the Jews had been slaves in Egypt. During the time of the Judges, foreign nations enslaved them at least seven times. Then there was the seventy-year Babylonian captivity. And even as they spoke, they were under Roman rule. They carried coins in their purses that showed Rome's dominion over them. But rather than trying to show them how deluded they were about political freedom, the Lord Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.... If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (Jh 8:34-6).

True definition of liberty: the power to do what we ought to do—to do what is right.

Liberty is the ability to fulfill our destiny, to have the power to achieve God's design for us. Freedom is not so much the removal of external restraints, but rather a condition of the soul or mind. Unless we are free inside, we cannot be free, even in a land of liberty. To be free is to be what we were created to be—obedient, grateful servants of God.

As we have seen, freedom in the ultimate sense of autonomy is an illusion. All we really have as humans is a choice of masters: sin or righteousness, Satan or God. This explains an apparent paradox: We must become Christ's slaves before we can be truly free. Only devotion to Christ will bring true liberty. This is fascinating, because we must conclude that *law*—obedience to the Scripture—actually gives what true freedom there is. A locomotive is only free to fulfill its purpose when it runs freely on two "confining" tracks. The same train is in absolute bondage and doomed to fail if it ever abandons those tracks. So we are most free when we run on the tracks of God's revealed will, and most certain to miss the purpose of our humanity if we leave those tracks for the "freedom" of our own way.

Marriage also illustrates true liberty. A husband and wife are bound by an oath. They are not "free" to love others in the way that they are obligated to love each other. But this very restriction, in a deeper sense, makes them *truly* free. Within the marriage, they are free to be themselves, to be what they really are—a married man and woman. Because of their mutual commitment, they are free from the fear of rejection. So as Christians, our commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ brings freedom from sin, alienation, guilt, aimlessness, and eventually death (by rapture or resurrection).

The ultimate bondage is not to law, therefore, but to *sin*. Contrary to what many think, the law is not opposed to freedom. In fact, true freedom is only found in obeying God's laws. After salvation, we do what pleases God not because we are forced to do so by the strictures of the law, but simply because we desire to please God. We are not free to sin, but we are free to serve. We are not free to hate, but we are free to love. We are free to pursue the will of God, and it is the law that teaches us His will. However, the *law itself* cannot bring freedom. It cannot help us to obey. All it can do is condemn us.

Grace. Since the law is powerless to help us, it cannot be the basis of freedom. Only grace can enable us to please God. Grace is God's loving favor on those who deserve His wrath. Every good thing we have is God's free gift (Rm 3:21-31; Eph 2:1-8). Yet grace and law are not opposed to each other, as many think. Grace would have no meaning apart from law. Without law there would be no sin (Rm 7:7), and without sin there would be no need of forgiveness. Without law, grace is meaningless; yet without grace, law is a terrifying destroyer. The Cross not only brings forgiveness through grace, it also proves the reality and significance of the law. Breaking the law is so terrible that God would have to give His only Son to meet the law's demands and set aside the judgment due Adam's race. That is how real and strong the law is. But the law no longer stands scowling over us in judgment. It shines brightly on our path to glory. It shows our duty—the will of God. It spotlights our destination—the glorious character of God Himself. To be free to obey the law, we first had to be freed *from* the law, and from sin's dominion.

- 1. Freedom of acceptance: Grace set us free from the law as a system of salvation.** Being justified by faith in Christ, we are no longer under God's law, but under His grace (Rm 3:19; 6:14-5; Gl 3:23-5). This means that our standing with God (the "peace" and "access" of Rm 5:1-2) rests wholly on the fact that we have been accepted in Christ. It does not depend on what we do; it will never be imperiled by what we fail to do. We live not by being perfect, but by being forgiven.

Religious people today try to establish their own righteousness, just as Paul saw the unbelieving Jews of his day trying to do (Rm 10:3). But our performance is never enough, for there are always wrong desires in our hearts, along with a lack of right ones, regardless of how correct our outward actions are (Rm 7:7-11; Ph 3:6). And God always looks at the heart first. All that the law can do is arouse, expose, and condemn the sin that permeates our moral makeup, and so make us aware of its reality, depth, and guilt (Rm 3:19; 1 Cr 15:56; Gl 3:10). So the futility of treating the law as a covenant of works, and seeking righteousness by it, becomes obvious (Gl 3:10-2; 4:21-31). So does the misery of not knowing what else to do. Christ sets us free from this bondage.

- 2. Freedom of conscience: Grace set us free from the law's condemnation** (Rm 8:1-4). We have freedom of conscience, because we have been freed from sin's penalty. We gain freedom through faith in Christ, who took our condemnation when He died in our place. He paid the full penalty required by the law for our transgressions, and has given us a standing before God which is the same as if we had never sinner at all. The law of God is no longer a threat to us. We stand before God with clean records and liberated consciences.
- 3. Freedom of obedience: Grace set us free from sin's dominion** (Jh 8:34-6; Rm 6:14-23). We have been supernaturally regenerated and made alive to God through union with Christ in His death and risen life (Rm 6:3-11), and this means that the deepest desire of their heart now is to serve God by practicing righteousness (Rm 6:18,22). Sin's domination over us not only produced constant acts of disobedience, but also a constant lack of zeal for law-keeping, rising sometimes to positive resentment and hatred toward the law. Now, however we have been created anew and indwelt by the Spirit of God. Motivated by gratitude, we "serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Rm 7:6). Our old desires may still rise up, but we no longer have to obey them. Sin no longer rules us. We have been set free from our old desires and rebellion and can joyfully obey God.
- 4. Freedom of knowledge: Grace set us free from superstitiously regarding matter and pleasure as intrinsically evil.** Many Christians through history have held this view of matter and pleasure, especially in medieval times. But Paul insists that Christians are free to enjoy as God's good gifts all created things and the pleasures they yield (1 Tm 4:1-5), as long as we don't transgress the Scripture in our enjoyments or hinder our own spiritual well-being or that of others (1 Cr 6:12-3; 8:7-13).

People tell us, “Christianity isn’t a lot of do’s and don’ts; it is not a list of rules.” There is some truth in this deduction, because Christianity is far more than a list of rules. It is a personal relationship with Christ Himself. Salvation gives us a new nature that desires to please God, and the Holy Spirit within enables us to please God. Yet Christianity is also not *less* than a list of rules. When people say the NT doesn’t contain rules, I wonder what Bible they’re reading. The NT is literally filled with commandments. It clearly contains many do’s and don’ts. We do not have the right to do what is right in our own eyes. Although we are not saved by the law, we demonstrate our love for Christ by obeying His commandments (Jh 14:15). The NT views Christian obedience as the practice of “good deeds” (works). Christians are to be “rich in good deeds” (1 Tm 6:18; Mt 5:16; Ep 2:10; 2 Tm 3:17; Tt 2:7,14; 3:8,14). A good deed is one done (a) according to the right standard (God’s revealed will, i.e. His moral law); (b) from a right motive (love to God and others); (c) with a right purpose (glorifying God, honoring Christ, benefiting others).

2. License

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

That stanza is a theme song for antinomianism (literally “anti-lawism”), or license. Antinomianism tells us that we have no obligation to obey the laws of God, because Christ supposedly freed us from the law in this sense. According to this view, grace not only freed us from the curse of God’s law, but also delivered us from any obligation to obey God’s law. So grace becomes a license for disobedience.

This is seriously wrong. Paul asks, “Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law” Rm 3:31. The spirit of antinomianism belongs not to our new nature, but to the old. It harks back to Lucifer’s desire to be autonomous, to be like the Most High. It claims to oppose oppression, but in fact opposes authority and rule of any sort. In guarding our liberty, we must be careful not to confuse liberty with libertinism.

License confuses justification with sanctification. We are justified by faith alone, apart from works. However, we grow in faith by keeping God’s holy commands—not to gain God’s favor, but out of loving gratitude for the grace already given to us through the work of Christ.

The uses of the law in the believer’s life.

1. **The law reveals sin.** The law of God is a mirror of God’s holiness and our unrighteousness. It shows us our need of a Savior. The law of God reflects and mirrors the perfect righteousness of God—it tells us much about who God is. And the law makes our sinfulness glaringly obvious. It acts as a severe schoolmaster to drive us to Christ for forgiveness. This was true when we were saved, and continues to be true throughout our lives.
2. **The law provides a rule of life for those regenerated through faith in Christ.** The law reveals what is pleasing and what is offensive to God. The Christian delights in the law as God Himself delights in it. This is the law’s highest function, to serve as a means for the people of God to give Him honor and glory. By studying the law, we attend the school of righteousness. Our redemption is from the curse of God’s law, not from our duty to obey it. We are justified, not because of our obedience to the law, but in order that we may become obedient to God’s law. To love Christ is to keep His commandments (Jh 14:15). To love God is to obey His law.

3. Legalism

Do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see... (Matthew 23:3-5).

Legalism is the opposite of its twin heresy, antinomianism. Whereas antinomianism denies the significance of law, legalism exalts law above grace. Legalism binds people where God has left them free. It often arises as an overreaction against antinomianism. To make sure we do not allow ourselves or others to slip into moral looseness, we tend to make rules more strict than God Himself does. When this occurs, legalism introduces a kind of tyranny over the people of God.

Legalists fail to see the limitations of the law. The law cannot produce righteousness in sinner or saint; it cannot give life or overcome sin. But as we have seen, the law has an important place. It is a gift of grace, not the enemy of grace. Grace may not substitute for it. Law leads us to grace, and grace then enables us to obey the law. And law is no enemy to freedom. True freedom is found only in wholehearted submission to the will of God, much of which is revealed in His laws. Nor is the Holy Spirit a substitute for law. God never intended that we would subjectively rely on the Spirit's inner impulse as a *substitute* for the written revelation of His will. The Holy Spirit is the author of the laws, and He enables us to obey them.

Principles. We sometimes hear that we are to live by principles, not by rules. But principles *are* rules! They are law. Principles are more widely applicable than other kinds of law, but God never intended them to substitute for all the other elements of His will. Principles are one variety of law, but they will never release us from the obligations of other, specific commandments. Principles are extremely vital, for they extend other laws, and allow us to apply them to modern situations.

The law is good (Rm 7:12), the law is spiritual (Rm 7:14), and the law continues to be in effect (Mt 5:17-19). But it is only good if it is used lawfully, as it was intended (1 Tm 1:8). Legalism is the unlawful use of the law. Before we look at what legalism is, however, we should consider what it is *not*.

What legalism is not.

1. **Legalism is not the existence of a set of rules and regulations or a code of law** (Gl 6:2; 1 Tm 3:2; Rm 8:2). The NT is full of them.
2. **Legalism is not a desire to obey God** (Ep 1:3; 4:1; 5:8; Ph 1:27). Obedience is a proof of salvation.
3. **Legalism is not having to do something** (1 Tim 3:2; Eph 5:28; 2 Th 1:3; Rm 15:27). Paul spoke of being obligated, being indebted—having to do something.
4. **Legalism is not having a list of do's and don'ts** (Rm 12:2; Cl 3:9; Gl 6:9; Ep 4:25-5:18; 1 Jh 2:13). Paul wrote many lists of don'ts, including some "picky little negative rules" about head-coverings, hair, and dress.
5. **Legalism is not obeying man-made laws.** Human authorities are ordained by God (marriage, Ep 5:22; home Eph 6:1; government, Rm 13:1; employment Eph 6:5; church, Hb 13:17). Obedience to human authority is not optional. The genuineness of our obedience to God is often tested at the point of human authority. Every person under a legitimate authority must obey that authority unless obedience would violate the revealed will of God (Ac 5:29). When human authority is not just, wise, or loving, the one under authority is not released from responsibility to obey (1 Pt 2:18).

What legalism is.

1. **Legalism is obedience to law as a way of salvation.** Relying on obedience to moral law or observance of ceremonial law for salvation (Rm 3:20,28; Gl 2:16; 3:11,21) is the most serious form of legalism. In Christ's day, the Pharisees thought that their status as children of Abraham made God's pleasure in them possible, and that their formalized daily law-keeping, down to minutest details, would make it actual. In Paul's time, the Judaizers viewed Gentile evangelism as a form of proselytizing for Judaism. They believed that the Gentile believer in Christ would gain increased favor with God by becoming a Jew (by circumcision and observing the festal calendar and ritual law). In Galatians, Paul condemns the Judaizers' "Christ-plus" message for denying the all-sufficiency of the Lord Jesus (Gl 3:1-3; 4:21; 5:2-6). In Colossians, Paul conducts a similar war against a similar "Christ-plus" formula

for “fullness” (i.e. spiritual completion: Cl 2:8-23). Any “plus” that requires us to *do* something in order to add to what Christ has already done is pure legalism and an insult to Christ.

2. **Legalism is obedience for self-glory** (Mt 6:1-18; 23:2-7; Lk 20:45-7; Jh 5:44). If we measure our own acceptability with God or the acceptability of other Christians with us on the basis of performance, we are legalists. If we let our light shine before men that they may see our good works and glorify us, we are taking the credit that belongs to God. If we take the credit for successfully obeying the law, rather than being amazed and thankful for the gracious, enabling Holy Spirit, we rob God. The Pharisees’ motive was to be seen by men (Mt 23:5). They wished to receive credit for a level of godliness that was not true (Mt 23:23-4). Their problem was not legalism, strictly speaking, but hypocrisy.
3. **Legalism is obedience through self-effort.** When we try to obey the law without relying on the enabling of the Holy Spirit, we, though saved by grace, are “saving” ourselves through works.
4. **Legalism is obedience from a motive of fear.** If we obey the law out of fear of the consequences, rather than love for the lawgiver, we are once again coming under the condemnation of the law. It is better to obey legalistically than to disobey, of course. God appeals to His children to obey both from a hope of reward and a fear of loss (Ez 3:17-21; 33:7-9; Dn 12:3; 1 Cr 3:10-15). But the highest motive is love for God. Obedience should flow from gratitude for all the gifts of grace.
5. **Legalism is obedience to the legal statement (“letter”) as a cover for violating the intent or spirit of the law** (Mt 15:3-9; 23:16-24). Although they professed great loyalty to the law, the Pharisees used the statement of the law to subvert the intent of the law, negating the law’s very aim. They focused entirely on the externals of action, disregarding motives and purposes, and reduced life to mechanical rule keeping. This practice created convenient loopholes. They taught that if you swore by the altar itself, rather than by the offering on the altar, your oath was not binding. If you made a contract in the name of the temple, rather than by the gold of the temple, you could break that contract. If you dedicated a possession of value to God, you would not have to use it to assist your own parents who were in need (Mt 23:17-8). Further, this practice emphasizes obeying the lesser, easier, visible, external letter while neglecting the heavy, more important thing, the “spirit” of the law. In order for the Pharisees to believe that they could keep the law, they first had to reduce it to its most narrow and wooden interpretation. The story of the rich young ruler illustrates this point. He asked the Lord Jesus how he could inherit eternal life. Christ told him to “keep the commandments.” The young man believed that he had kept them all. But the Lord decisively revealed the one “god” that he had served before the true God—riches. Note that Christ never set the letter against the spirit (Mt 23:3,23). The letter is important, but the spirit is most important. The statement of the law will never violate the principle of the law, but we must above all guard the principle.
6. **Legalism elevates human tradition to the level of divine law** (Mr 2:16-3:6; 7:1-8). The Pharisees were guilty of another form of legalism. They added their own laws to the law of God. Their “traditions” were raised to a status equal to the law of God. They robbed people of their liberty and put chains on them where God had left them free. That kind of legalism did not end with the Pharisees. It has also plagued churches in every generation.
7. **Legalism majors on minors and minors on majors.** Another form of legalism is majoring on the minors. The Lord Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for omitting the weightier matters of the law while they were scrupulous in obeying minor points (Mt 23:23-4). This tendency remains a constant threat today. We have a tendency to exalt to the supreme level of godliness whatever virtues we possess and downplay our vices as insignificant points. For example, we may view refraining from dancing as a great spiritual strength while considering our covetousness a minor matter.

Legalism is a distortion of obedience that can never produce truly good works. It sees good deeds as a way for us to earn more of God's favor than we have at the moment. It is also arrogant. If we believe that our labor earns God's favor, we will develop contempt for those who do not labor in the same way. Legalism also opposes love. Its self-advancing purpose squeezes kindness and compassion out of the heart. Legalism takes our focus off Christ and puts it on us. It feeds our pride, but starves our souls.

Law and Faith

Law and faith are different, like apples and oranges. The law is a standard; faith is a disposition or attitude. Faith is the only way to respond to grace. When God speaks to us in grace, He does not say, "Do for Me," but rather, "I have done for you." We cannot earn grace; we take what grace offers by faith. Yet biblical faith predisposes us to obedient discipleship (Jm 2:17-8). The Spirit, present in every believer, produces His fruit (Gl 5:16,18,22-3). God masterfully neutralized the law's curse through Christ's sacrifice and now enables us to fulfill the demands of the law through the Spirit's indwelling. Christ perfectly obeyed the law so that He could be condemned by the law in our place. God has declared that we are free from the law's curse to fulfill it in the Spirit. We are therefore free by faith to obey the law. Obedience is a dimension of genuine biblical faith. Faith and law are not opposed unless we use the law legalistically. Abraham, the father of the faithful, offered Isaac in obedience to God's command. Scripture says, "You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected" (Jm 2:22).