



*A Ministry of the
Church of God (Seventh Day)*

The Path to Christian Living



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Legalism? Antinomianism?

Or the Gospel of Christ?

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The Path to Christian Living: Legalism? Antinomianism? Or the Gospel of Christ?

After we have trusted Christ as Savior and been baptized, what controls our behavior? A few basic answers are often given to this question.

Some believers will say, "We are now governed by the law." They place great emphasis on the law, either to earn salvation or to maintain it, and are sometimes referred to as *legalists*. They stress a list of rules for fear that Christians will claim God's grace for a spiritual covering while living without proper moral, ethical, and spiritual discipline. To guard against such permissive and unholy behavior, these believers feel that only reading the law of God, typically recorded in the Old Testament, is sufficient.

True, a number of so-called Christians in every age have abused the doctrine of grace and turned it into a license to do pretty much as they pleased (Jude 4). Some have even defended an immoral or unlawful lifestyle, arguing that those who have been saved by God's grace are no longer obligated to the ancient laws of God. The word that describes anyone who intentionally and consistently denies the validity of God's moral law for Christians is *antinomian*. It means "lawless" or "against the law."

The legalist, then, depends on obedience to law either as a means of salvation or to maintain salvation. The antinomian, on the other hand, rejects moral law as binding on

Christian conduct. Both viewpoints miss the point of the gospel and fail to understand its power.

The gospel does not permit one to presume on the grace of God, turning it into license. Paul wrote, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not!" (Romans 6:1, 2). In several other places the Bible warns against using grace as an excuse for a sinful lifestyle.

The legalist can therefore rest assured: The proper preaching of the gospel does not lower God's moral standards. In fact, just the opposite is true: The gospel believer is motivated by God's Spirit within to shun the wrong and do the right — to trust and obey, to fulfill the spirit and intent of the law from the heart. The legalist needs to recognize there is a greater motivation and a greater power for holy Christian living than the law itself provides.

The gospel also brings liberty, not as the antinomian imagines, but a liberty couched in personal responsibility. True, the gospel sets the believer free from the condemnation of sin. Once freed, however, they are not their own master. They are set free from the old master of sin so that they may serve a new Master: the Lord Jesus Christ.

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?

But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from

the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:15-18).

Thus, the believer is set free not only from the *penalty* of sin (justification) but also from the *power* of sin as God's Spirit begins to produce the fruit of righteous living (sanctification) in them.

Justification and sanctification go together. The gospel that saves also sanctifies. The antinomian needs to realize that their liberty in Christ is not freedom to do what they wish, but the moral freedom and power to do what they ought. True liberty is the Christ-conformed life, not a life based on arbitrary and self-centered conduct.

Christian conduct, then, springs from the gospel of God's merciful love, empowered by the Holy Spirit. The book of Romans stresses the former (see Romans 12:1ff; 13:8-10), while the book of Galatians accents the latter ("Walk in the Spirit" — Galatians 5:16ff). When the apostle Paul addressed misconduct in the early church, only occasionally did he appeal to the law as the remedy. Instead, he consistently reminded Christians that the gospel has brought them into a new relationship with God.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Because of Christ, God regards Christians as dead to sin — new creatures, sons and daughters of God. When Christians realize this, as Paul points out, they can no longer

continue to live like sinners. Their position in Christ requires a higher standard. And it is the gospel — not the law nor a person's own judgment or conscience — that keeps the believer on the straight and narrow. It does so in three ways.

Motivation

First, the gospel provides the best motivations for right living: faith and love. The faith that saves is itself based on a personal identification with Christ. Through the gospel, the believer is united with Christ in the likeness of His death, burial, and resurrection (see Romans 6). Just as Christ died for sin, so the believer in Christ dies to sin, self, and the world. Just as Christ rose from the dead, so the believer in Christ rises to walk in newness of life.

Out of love and gratitude for God who first loved us, and for what Christ has done for us, we who believe are supernaturally motivated to do what is right and pleasing to God. A true grasp of the gospel permits us to do no less.

For the love of Christ constrains [compels] us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and arose again (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15).

If the believer finds this not so, then they are failing to be what they have already become in Christ: dead to sin and alive to God.

Power

Second, the gospel empowers the believer to live right. The law — though holy, just, and good — could never do this because of the weakness of human nature (Romans 8:3). Through the gospel, God's Spirit resides within to transform our minds and gradually conform us to the "mind of Christ." The Spirit's inner transformation of the believer's thinking, character, and behavior (mind, heart, and body) is one of the central ethical motifs of Christianity.

And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you (Romans 8:10, 11).

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God (12:2).

And be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:23, 24).

Example, or Standard

Third, the gospel directs our conduct by Jesus' example, not merely by the commandments of God. Peter appeals to us to walk in Christ's steps (1 Peter 2:21ff), as does John (1 John 2:6).

Paul said, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). The life of Jesus provides the believer with an ethical model. On the cross, Christ gave His all. Can the believer, who patterns his life after Christ's, do any less? By walking in Christ's steps, the believer is learning to demonstrate the same love, compassion, obedience, and humble service that Jesus himself displayed to God and humanity.

The very word *Christian* means to be like Christ. Christ-likeness comes by receiving the mind of Christ and by following His example. The Christian's ethics are chiefly Christ centered (What would Christ have me do?), rather than law centered (What is the minimum I need to do?) or self-centered (What can I do and get away with it?). The personal example of Jesus Christ actually raises the standard of what was established in the written law of God given at Mount Sinai.

Proper Response

When faced with ethical decisions regarding human conduct and lifestyle, the legalist often responds, "All the answers are in the law. If I do exactly what the law says, I can't go wrong." In turn, the antinomian may say, "I am free from the law and can do whatever seems best. The situation and my own conscience will determine my behavior."

The gospel-believing Christian, however, should respond like this: "I am Christ's new creation, and the old sinful self no longer rules in my life. Motivated by God's love

and empowered by His Spirit, I will live in harmony with His eternal moral standards as I see and hear them in Jesus. To do otherwise would be inconsistent with my faith in Christ."

In Christ alone we find the proper motivation, power, and example to guide our Christian conduct:

Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith . . . (Hebrews 12:1, 2).



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