

Thanksgiving: that God is love. God is for us! “5 **He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”** (Mt 17:5 ESV)

Please do not forget to pray for all the shut-ins and isolated brothers and sisters in our congregations C. Campbell (Fredericton) and J. Steffes (Caribou, Me), Mr. Ross Bathurst, P. Ward (Saint John) and others.

ACTIVITIES FOR THE MONTH OF MARCH 2020

Times of worship services: Moncton – 10:30 AM every Sunday

- Time of worship services in **Saint John** – Sunday, **March 8 and 22** at 2:30 PM.
- **Communion**- On 1st and 3rd Sunday – **Moncton**
and 2nd and 4th Sunday - **Saint John**
- **Address:**
 - Moncton— 70 King St. —Sage building, second floor;
 - Saint John—50 Newport Cres., Portland United church.

The next Discipleship groups: Thursday February 27 @ 7:30 home of Mr. and Mrs. Vautour (Will confirm by Wednesday if we have the discipleship group were not).

Local Website: Should you have forgotten the password to enter “**For members only**” on the www.worshipim.ca website, please do not hesitate to contact Mr. Vautour.

Prayer request from Mrs. MacCauley (GCI Saint John) for her sister-in-law C. O’Leary. She is presently hospitalized at the St. John regional Hospital following a heart attack. **Mrs. C. O’Leary is in her 90s.**

Intercessory prayers for Mr. Hyde (GCI PEI) - he was just hospitalized for a month suffering from pneumonia. He went outside and fell. As he could not get up, he stayed outside for an undetermined amount of time. He has just returned home on Friday. He is still recuperating. Your intercessory prayers are appreciated for both he and his wife.

Please pray for the leaders of this world who have to tackle enormous problems – problems that will only be fully resolved at the second return of Jesus. “1 ¶ First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. 3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior,” (1Ti 2:1-3 ESV)

Please pray for all the Christian churches in Canada, that we may all grow in the grace and knowledge of our Saviour Jesus.

Prayers for GCI across the world: that we will walk in God’s will for us and that we will see, understand and participate in his work as He guides the leadership, Mr. Williams, GCI Director, Mr. Bill

Hall, Canadian Director and all the others in leadership wherever they may be.

[Avoiding the chains of legalism](#)

Posted: 21 Feb 2020 06:46 PM PST

This post is an edited version of a lecture given by Grace Communion Seminary President Dr. Gary Deddo, titled "On Misdiagnosing Legalism and Finding the Right Remedy."

Some say it is legalistic to encourage people to obey God. Charges of legalism typically arise when obedience and legalism are framed within either/or dichotomies: law or gospel, law or grace, love or obedience, rules or relationships, old covenant or new covenant. But to understand what legalism is (and to understand its remedy), we must start the discussion with a fundamental theological question: *Is God good and opposed to all evil?* If so, has God revealed his good will and ways *so that* we may live towards that good and away from the ways of evil? In other words, is obedience to the will and ways of our Creator and Redeemer good, and is disobedience sinful, that is, a collusion with the evil that our Triune God opposes? Is obedience a certain kind of *relationship* with God that God enables by revealing to us his will and ways so that we may obey and so do what is good?

A *yes* answer to these questions reflects an understanding that God intends for our relationship and interaction with him to always be what Scripture refers to as *the obedience of faith* -- our response to the revelation of God's good will and ways that always coheres with God and his goodness. Seen within this relational framework, disobedience is always a departure from God's good will and ways and thus aligns with what is evil -- what is opposed to God's goodness. Disobedience is a break or disruption of harmonious relationship with God, which God does not want and which certainly is not good for us -- even if we can't tell exactly how or why.



Picture via Brian Smithson, Creative Commons)

Misunderstanding legalism

Though legalism is a real problem that puts people into spiritual bondage, charges of legalism are sometimes (often?) grounded in misunderstandings concerning what actually constitutes legalism. One such misunderstanding is viewing as legalists those who believe God wants us to be consistent in doing what our Triune God defines as good. Were that the case, one could avoid being a legalist by simply being inconsistently obedient to God. But that idea is nonsense! If God is good and his ways are good, then his will for us would be for us to always do what is good. Avoiding legalism cannot mean being inconsistently good by sometimes doing what is wrong.

Another misunderstanding of what constitutes legalism is viewing as legalists those who think God makes no exceptions to his will and ways. Were that so, one could avoid being a legalist by affirming that God is not concerned whether or not we sometimes disobey -- since God is not legalistic, he is ready to make exceptions. But that idea is also nonsense! God is not inconsistent within himself, his will for us is not inconsistent and his view of what is good and what is evil does not waver.

Misunderstanding grace

Unfortunately, these misunderstandings concerning what constitutes legalism come with related misunderstandings concerning what constitutes grace. Grace is not about God making exceptions to the rules he has given in Scripture. Being gracious does not mean God sets aside the rules/laws for a time. It does not mean that God overlooks the breaking of the rules/laws he has given. Seeing grace as the granting of exceptions to rules means viewing God as being predisposed to accepting our disobedience, knowing we can't keep the rules perfectly.

Misunderstanding God's rules.

Given these mistaken views of both legalism and grace, the mistaken conclusion is that the only reason God set out the rules (laws - commands) is to show us that we can't keep them. But then, when we hear of his grace, we discover he never expected us to keep them anyway, and he has provided a way to overlook our breaking of the rules. But these are false assumptions about both God and his grace, based on the false understanding that the rules - laws God has given are merely what God preferred -- what God wished, what God simply wills. Nothing else is disturbed, broken, damages or distorted if the rules are disobeyed. Nothing objective has been harmed or disordered. The rules were all in the mind of God anyway, and expressed as his will in rules. So, all that is required to change the situation is a change in God's mind -- God can simply say, "Well I made up the rule and I can allow for exceptions to the rule and then all will be well!"

Viewing God's rules - laws as arbitrary, made up, mental (psychological) and subjective means that God's will and rules for us don't tell us about a created reality and its actual and real relationship to God. It means viewing the rules as not corresponding to any objective reality. While such rules may have been broken -- nothing else is. Evil is simply the breaking of rules that God set up -- and likely never expected us to follow anyway.

According to this mistaken view, disobedience does not warp or twist a relationship with God, or damage human life, or pervert or distort human relationships, or violate any actual purpose (*telos*), or denigrate anything that was actually sacred/holy, or disorder and harm human nature and nature itself. Or if it did, these all, too, were simply arbitrarily set up in God's mind and could all be rectified simply by God changing his mind, making exceptions to them all. According to this view, there is no objective moral and spiritual order to things in God's creation and in relationship to God. It's all a matter of God's personal preferences that God can dismiss or change in a moment.

Misunderstanding evil

According to this mistaken view, evil is simply subjective, it has no objective reality. Evil is simply the disregard of arbitrary rules God sets up, which God can change his mind about at any time if he pleases. And because God is gracious, we find out that he is perfectly able to change his mind. And that's what his forgiveness is about: he simply says, "In your case I won't count that, and that, and that as evil. It's now all good! And so, now, all is well. We're all reconciled. It's all OK. I can make as many exceptions as I like since the rules (and any nature, purpose, order, design) were arbitrarily assigned and so can be arbitrarily dismissed by a counter/opposite act of will!" In this mistaken view, nothing was said, thought, felt or done that cannot be easily undone by a flip of God's mind. It's simply a matter of mind over matter (and over anything and everything else that might exist).

But that is not the case! The grace of God requires a real incarnation, a real and costly crucifixion, a real bodily resurrection, a real bodily ascension in an actual history that God himself enters into through the Son, all indicating that evil has a reality as does the disorder, destruction, distortion, damage, disruption that leads to real death.

This reality shows that the evil done is not merely the violation of arbitrary "rules" from God. The grace of God accomplished in and through Jesus Christ reveals that the wrong done has to be undone, redone, remade. Grace is not a change of mind, but an actual and real costly victory over an objective disorder by an objective good that characterizes the very being and nature of God, and expresses itself in an unswerving, completely consistent act of goodness that is implacably opposed to evil and its resistance to the good that God is and to his good purposes for his good creation.

An easy sentimental, subjective view of evil as simply the violation of arbitrary rules, not only undermines the significance and reality of evil, but undermines the meaning and reality of grace. For if grace is simply an act of will to set aside disobedience, then it is just as arbitrary, mental, subjective and capricious as the rules God originally set up. Such a God could simply never choose to be gracious and "forgive," or he could oscillate back and forth for all eternity. God could just as easily offer his grace as withdraw it from his creation, since the only real difference that is made, one way or the other, is a change in the mind or

psychological state of God. According to this mistaken view, the goodness of God's grace is no more stable than the goodness of his rules. The faithfulness of God then becomes meaningless.

But the reality is that God, who is ever-faithful, is always gracious. Moreover, God lets us know about what is good and what is evil by his act and by his Word (Living and written). We find in this revelation that God is implacably opposed to an evil that is real and has real, actual effects upon his good creation. Consequently, this gracious God is committed to eradicating all that is not good, condemning all evil and bringing it to an end. And more than that, God in his good grace, is committed to rescuing us from all evil, including the evil in us, so that we might dwell with him in the perfect goodness of the actual and real holy fellowship and communion that is the Trinity. Our Triune God would not be gracious if he made exceptions to his good will and did not will that all evil be condemned and all persons be rescued from all evil. That is the truth and objective reality of God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified, resurrected, ascended and returning for us and our salvation.

Misunderstanding God's will

Mistaken ideas about what constitutes legalism arise from mistaken assumptions that God's will is only about rules that are arbitrary --- ones that have nothing to do with an actual good or a real evil. That being so, these rules can be followed or dismissed by God since they in themselves are neither good nor evil and do not correspond to an actual real objective moral order. They just represent what God wants because he wants it. According to this mistaken view, whatever God wills is independent of God's nature or character and independent of the nature, character and purposes for his creation. Following that line of thinking, God can change what he wills at one moment to the opposite at another. The good is simply what God wills at a certain time and had written down. Evil is then simply the subjective disregard, by those who are not God, of God's personal and private wishes written down at a certain time and place. It is all then just a matter of arbitrary wills (God's and human's) either being in alignment or out of alignment with each other. It's simply a battle of wills and a matter of whose will, will prevail. Those who follow this mistaken view of what constitutes legalism end up having nothing to say to those who have no compunction about dismissing some or all of God's rules. They have no grounds to encourage a consistent obedience to God's will and ways -- at least no grounds that are not admittedly arbitrary.

Such mistaken understandings of what constitutes legalism promote the idea that God can make as many exceptions as he pleases to what he might will at one point in time, since nothing is lost thereby. God simply changes his mind about what he wills, making an exception, and now wills something else, the exception. The will of God is then simply that, a *willing*. It is good only in the sense that God wills x, y, or z, a and/or not a. God's will, as noted above, is thus disconnected from God's nature, character, heart, mind or purpose; or the nature, character, purpose for his creation. Evil then is simply doing what God did not want done at some point in time. But if he wills to make an exception, what was done is no longer evil!

Given that erroneous viewpoint, God is essentially a being that supremely wills whatever he wills and can will anything he pleases. Those who define legalism in this mistaken way then have no way to object to those who believe that grace means unending exceptions to God's rules, so that the will and ways of God, such as are stated in Scripture, never need to be taken seriously. If anything, sinning just gives God greater opportunity to be gracious, to make even more exceptions to his rules. There were in fact those in Paul's day who were teaching just that (Rom. 6:1, 15).

What's wrong with legalism?

Having ruled out mistaken understandings of what constitutes legalism, and the false assumptions and remedies that go along with the misdiagnoses, what then might be the real problem of legalism, if it actually is a problem? What is a correct diagnosis of what constitutes legalism? I think we can come up with a four-part definition of what's actually wrong with legalism, why we should object to legalism. This definition will then point to what the real

remedy to legalism is, since the remedy is neither inconsistent obedience nor is it counting on God's grace to make exceptions to his (arbitrary) rules.

Four errors of legalism

1. Salvific legalism

This form of legalism involves thinking or believing that salvation is earned or merited by our obedience to the will of God. In accordance with this view, the degree of conformity to God's laws (commandments, instructions, admonitions, exhortations, and warnings) is what leads to our ultimate salvation or not. This thinking may include the idea that within that legal/meritorious system, God can make whatever exceptions he likes to the rules, because he made up the rules and he can make exceptions if he likes or doesn't like. But obedience to the will of God is needed to gain God's blessings and salvation. God's salvation is available to us only on the basis of our obeying God's laws. That form of legalism ought to be rejected.

The next three forms of legalism do not necessarily make salvation conditional upon obedience, like the first form. They mostly come into play for those who regard themselves as saved by grace yet consider themselves to be sanctified by living a life that is in conformance with God's laws.

2. Duty-bound legalism

This form of legalism involves regarding obedience as simply doing what God commands or wants because God wills that we do and don't do certain things. We obey God's commands simply because God has given the commands to us. This is a Christianized form of Stoicism. Obeying is simply a matter of doing one's duty, what is assigned to you, what you are obligated to do, even if already saved by grace.

This obedience may or may not be regarded as earning or meriting salvation. Ultimate salvation may be regarded as a free gift along with God's forgiveness. Obedience then is not to fulfill a condition to merit salvation. Obedience is simply doing your duty because God expects us, as his forgiven children, to do what he pleases. And we don't want to displease God or to have him think we're not grateful for our salvation. So we must do what he says. Our obedience is essentially a choice and act of our wills. We conform our wills to God's will and that is obedience. Obedience then is primarily an act of trying and when trying doesn't lead to obedience, the solution is really and simply to try harder.

This view too, should be resisted. Why? Because it is a form of legal obedience, and not the sort of obedience that God wants. As Barth, Bloesch and JB Torrance have noted, legal obedience is obedience to law apart from the gospel -- it is simply obeying God's will or following God's ways (whether or not expressed in terms of laws, rules or principles as stated in Scripture) because God wills it.

Note that such obedience comes without any reference to who God is -- to God's goodness and the goodness of his ways or to his provision for us (e.g. for the Spirit, the hope for his coming kingdom) or for his presence and working among us and for the many promises made to us). According to this mistaken view, the Christian life is primarily about what we do for God according to what we find Scripture telling us to do. Once the matter of salvation is taken care of, there is an almost exclusive concentration on the will of God disconnected from the nature, character and ongoing relationship and provision of God. It's about the *imperatives* not about the *indicatives* of grace. The Christian life then can easily become more and more burdensome and even disillusioning.

3) All-sufficient rule legalism

This form of legalism involves thinking that obedience to the will and ways of God can be determined in every case simply by making reference to the commands, imperatives, rules, exhortations, and warnings given in Scripture. According to this view, the rules or legal descriptions given in Scripture of what we ought to do in order to be doing the will of God are regarded as exhaustive and complete in the sense that sufficient for every situation. The rules or commands tells us everything we need to know to be obedient. There is no need to look further.

Some who hold to this view of the all-sufficiency of the rules or laws of God for every application will affirm that if Scripture does not explicitly proscribe or prescribe what to do, then what Scripture does not proscribe or prescribe is allowable. The idea is that obedience means sticking to the rules since they lay out *all* that is required. This was the kind of righteousness and obedience exemplified by the Sadducees of Jesus' day. This kind of legalism also ought to be resisted.

4) *Ever-expanding rule legalism*

This form of legalism involves the promoting of the conviction that obedience requires not simply conformity to the explicit laws, imperatives or commands given by God, but also making sure they are not violated by placing additional rules and regulations "around" them, so that you'd have to first violate another more restrictive rule or requirement before you'd be at the position of violating what God had explicitly commanded. In Jesus' day this was referred to as "placing a hedge" (of rules) around the law of God.

A variant of this idea is saying that true obedience requires further detailed logical and legal specification of what explicit obedience to a command looks like in every situation that could be reasonably anticipated. In this way, all the requirements of obedience would be legally described. The will of God would be known and spelled out with expansive legal descriptions or rules which would anticipate any and every situation. This kind of legalism was prominent among the Pharisees of Jesus' day. This form of legalism also should be resisted.

The root of legalism's errors

What's wrong with the four forms of legalism mentioned above? And what would be a good and right remedy to them? Note that in all four, the concern focuses exclusively on the commands, imperatives, rules, principles, exhortations of Scripture, regarding mostly behavior. Such concentration is carried on in isolation from most everything else about God and God's relationship with creation, his people, his ultimate purposes, his nature and character. God is essentially reduced to a commander -- one who wills things for people. The center of attention is on what Scripture conveys about the explicit will of God and what behavior (which can include attitude) conforms to that will. Obeying God, then, is constricted to conforming to his expressed will, relating to God as commander. There is little consideration as to the particular nature, character and purposes of God, that is, to who God is and little consideration as to the quality of a living, vital, ongoing relationship with God.

The relationship with God that results from such form of legalism is akin to a master and servant-slave. The servant does not know the heart, mind, character and purposes of his master. The slave only knows and only needs to know his master's will expressed in commands or rules directed to him and to make sure they are carried out to the letter. Jesus sought to correct this distorted view of God and his will by indicating that he regarded his followers as friends, not servants. And he demonstrated that kind of relationship with them because, as he noted, he let them in on God's intentions and purposes just as the Father has made them known to him, his Son (**John 15:15**). Jesus let his friends in on the heart and mind and purposes that lie behind the commands, the imperatives that God the Father issues. He enabled them to know who the Commander is who gives the commands so that they would obey out of the knowledge and love for who the Commander is. In the words of Paul and the author of Hebrews, Jesus enabled "the obedience of faith," not just a legal obedience. Such obedience then arises out of a relationships of trust-faith in the goodness, faithfulness and freely-given provision of God. Out of that arises a relationship of love.

The remedy for all forms of legalism

Rather than being interested in mere conformity to his will, our Triune God is interested in having with us a relationship of trust -- one that yields a free and joyful obedience in fellowship and communion with God. Given this truth (which is often repeated in Scripture), we can offer this biblical definition of legalism:

Legalism is any form of obedience that does not arise out of faith, hope and love for God according to who he is, according to who he has revealed himself to be, ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ.

God is interested in why we obey him as much as whether we obey him. Or should we say, he is *more* interested in why? If we don't know who the Commander is, we will likely misunderstand to some degree what God wills, or apply it in an inappropriate way, or be motivated in ways that actually undermine faith, hope and love for God and a faithful witness to who God is. This is why we see in Scripture the pattern of connecting who God is (summed up as the indicatives of God's grace) with the commands or rules of God (summed up as the imperatives of God's grace).

Obedience that involved the heart was always recognized, even under the old covenant. Jesus' teaching acknowledged that, and did not simply add in the matter of the heart making that the difference he came to make. The problem Jesus was addressing was not that God had in the past been unconcerned about the heart, and therefore Jesus had to add this to a list of God's expectations for his people. Jesus' concern was that our hearts be in the right place, a concern that was recognized in the old covenant. The sort of obedience God desires has always been the sort that comes out of a relationship with God grounded in trust, faith, holy love and worship.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament tell us that we are to love God with all we have and all we are. The New Testament makes it clear that we love God because he first loved us. So too, we forgive others because God first forgave us. We love others because we have been loved by God in Jesus Christ. We care for the foreigner because God cared for us when we were alienated from God. We seek reconciliation with others, even our enemies, because God has reconciled us to himself in Jesus Christ. We seek ways to pursue reconciliation with all peoples because we have already been reconciled in the new humanity of Jesus (**Eph. 2:15**). We seek to do good to all, especially those of the household of faith (**Gal. 6:10**), because God is good to us. We seek to be at peace with all, "as far as it depends upon us," (**Rom 12:18**) because we are at peace with God. We are to hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good, because God is good and implacably opposed to evil (**Rom 12:9**) and has determined that it has no future. We overcome evil with good, because God overcomes evil with good, not by returning evil for evil (**Rom. 12: 21, 1 Thess. 5:15**).

The obedience that God is looking for, providing for and wants to cultivate in us, is the obedience of faith -- evangelical obedience. That is what is ethical! That is what prevents legalism. Such obedience will indeed be consistent, and will want to be so, because God's ways and will are good and right and lead to life for us and for others and that includes right relationships with God and with others. The obedience of faith will not look for inconsistency, loopholes and exceptions. It will not consider God's laws - rules - commands - imperatives apart from who God is as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The obedience that arises out of an ongoing and growing faith relationship with God will not be an onerous burden, just as John reminds us: "His commands are not burdensome" (**1 John 5:3**). They are burdensome only to those trying to obey God rules - ways but who do not know who the Commander is, or who do not have a relationship of faith, hope and love with God mediated by Jesus Christ, or who do not see any connection between who God is and what and why he commands us to do those things. The obedience of faith is the only right remedy for any form of legalism that is rightly diagnosed.

GCI principle website and Moncton Websites—www.gci.org, www.worshipim.ca, www.facebook.com/GCIMoncton; For a wealth of helpful articles about God, grace and his plan for salvation, who we are, etc., please see the GCI.org website.

Contact Information: Pastor's contact information: email— evautour47@outlook.com