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1-2008

Legalism and Righteousness by Faith Part 1

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Legalism and “righteousness by faith” Part one of a two-part series

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Righteousness by faith” is foundational to the biblical concept of salvation. In Romans 3:21–26, Paul states that God reveals His righteous and just character not only through His law, but also when He extends mercy by justifying and forgiving those who have broken the law, if they accept His righteousness through faith that is of and in Christ and receive His atoning sacrifice. The apostle stresses the importance of righteousness by faith by repeating, explaining, and illustrating it through much of his Epistle to the Romans (4:5, 9, 11, 13; 9:30; 10:6) and elsewhere (Gal. 5:5; Phil. 3:9). For Paul, righteousness by faith is the heart of the gospel (Rom. 1:16, 17).

According to Paul, all who believe in Jesus “are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24).¹ To the Ephesians he wrote, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9). Essential to saving grace is a “legal” declaration of acquittal from condemnation (e.g., Matt. 9:2; John 8:11; cf. Rom. 8:1). In addition, because the justifying gift of grace brings the transforming presence of Christ, it naturally provides power to bear the gift of “fruit” in one’s life, namely, sanctification (Rom. 6:22; 1 Cor. 1:4–8, 30).

Because “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23) and no amount of good works can ever redeem anyone from past failure, law-keeping is completely

ruled out as a means of salvation, for salvation is possible only by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8, 9). Does this mean that there is something wrong with God’s law? Not at all. The law is holy, just, good, and spiritual (Rom. 7:12, 14). It serves the crucial purpose of protecting us by revealing what is right and what is wrong (Rom. 3:20; 7:7–13).² The law is holy because it is based on love (Matt. 22:37–40), the basic principle of God’s character (1 John 4:8). However, while keeping the law results in life in the sense that its principles of cause and effect are for our benefit and preservation (Lev. 18:5; cf. Exod. 20:12), the law is powerless to help anyone who has already broken it (Gal. 3:10–12).

God’s law is not legalistic, nor is true obedience to that law. Rather, obedience is “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). By freeing us from condemnation, Christ has set us free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:1–3), “so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (v. 4). Because “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5), we receive the basis of harmony with God’s law and character (namely, love) as a gift.

What is legalism?

Legalism is *misuse* of the law. That is, it is using the law for a purpose other than that for which it is intended. Legalism includes futile attempts to earn salvation by one’s own performance (e.g., Luke 18:9–14) and to gain assurance by achieving a minimum standard (Matt. 19:16–22). Legalistic abuse of God’s law also includes using it with human traditions added to it, to gain power over others (Matt. 23:1–28). Rather than trying to protect people—a purpose for which the law is designed—legalists hypocritically make a show of protecting the law itself, including their own version of the law, for which they claim divine authority (Matt. 15:1–9). By laying down the standards to which others must adhere, legalists enhance their status, political clout, and even wealth. Such legalists end up violating God’s law by obscuring and ignoring the principles on which it is based (Matt. 23:23–35). By taking the place of God, it could also be said, they commit a form of blasphemy.

Satan is antinomian, against God’s law (John 8:44; 1 John 3:8, 10). But do we know that he is also the biggest legalist in the universe? This is not because he is divided against himself (Matt. 12:26), but because he misuses God’s law and deceives people regarding it. He perverts it and

blasphemously uses his perverted version to gain power and to discourage people from victory over sin and salvation through Jesus Christ. Then he turns around and hypocritically accuses God's loyal people of being legalists because they are seeking to obey God! Because Satan tries to use God's law against God's loyal people to slander and destroy them (Zech. 3:1–5; Rev. 12:10), he is a malicious false witness (Deut. 19:16–19).

Legalism is alive and well in the Christian community today. For one thing, our society is so driven by performance

church community. Those who try to restore harmony through sound biblical evidence and reasoning are often baffled by their lack of success, which is due to the fact that the main problem resides outside the bounds of rationality in the realm of personalities and their drives for influence and power.

A so-called righteousness by faith based on a legalistic assumption

There is still another kind of widespread legalism that is not generally recognized as such. This approach

a. Because moral transformation is limited, Christ's work *in* believers and role as our example must be limited. All that matters is Christ's substitutionary legal work *for* believers, which accounts them righteous at all times, no matter what level of moral or spiritual failure or victory they may be experiencing.⁶

b. God's Old Testament moral law is an unreasonable and obsolete standard of righteousness. This law is superseded by the higher New Testament and "new covenant" standard of love.

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that people have trouble switching gears when it comes to salvation. Because the Bible teaches that we are all judged by what we do and think (Eccles. 12:14; Rom. 2:16), many suppose that in order to be saved they must, by their own efforts, keep from sinning. However, the Bible also teaches that true good works come from faith (Gal. 5:6; cf. James 2:17–26), which means that not sinning is possible only as a gift from God (Jude 24). Our salvation is based not upon our performance but upon Christ (1 John 5:11–13). Any good works that we do are only involved in receiving, not earning, His gift of salvation.³

Another kind of legalism among us is the imbalance with which some Christians latch on to things that are really nonessential and force them on others as essential. Whatever the chosen issue may be, the effects are elitism, criticism, or condemnation of others, and polarization of the

claims to be gospel "righteousness by faith" because it emphasizes God's free and gracious justification of sinners who believe in Christ and His once-for-all sacrifice as the only basis of their salvation. However, this true concept gets skewed by being mixed up with other ideas, such as:

1. Not only is our human nature tainted by sin so that we constantly need the covering atonement of Christ (which is true; cf. Num. 28:1–8: daily sacrifice for all), beyond this, human depravity is so extreme that we commit sins all the time, including involuntarily.⁴
2. While the converted life should manifest victory over sin in the process of sanctification as moral growth that accompanies justification, full obedience to God's law is impossible.⁵ This view has several corollaries:

c. A judgment of the works of Christian believers according to the standards of God's law is irrelevant because works have nothing to do with their salvation, and they are already judged as saved in Christ. They certainly could not be judged according to standards presented in the Old Testament, which are not binding on New Testament Christians.

We now proceed to examine these notions through five questions arising from issues of human depravity, obedience, justification, Old Testament law, and judgment.

1. Depravity

Is human depravity so domineering that even after experiencing conversion, one cannot help but continue to sin?

The widely held assumption of extreme human depravity has deep

historical roots in the teachings of some Protestant Reformers who challenged the Roman Catholic doctrine that because people are partly unaffected by sin, they are capable of contributing to their salvation through their own meritorious works.⁷ According to the Bible, all human beings are affected by sin (Rom. 3:10–18, 23; cf. Pss. 5; 14; 36; 53; Isa. 59). This moral weakness inclines toward further sins (James 1:14, 15). The fallen sinful body and its evil propensities remain until Christ's second coming, when God's faithful people will be changed and receive immortality (1 Cor. 15:52, 53).⁸ Any moral good that we have is from God, from outside of ourselves (Rom. 7:18).

In the Bible, words for "sin" can refer either to fallen nature as a dynamic state of being or to specific infractions of divine law. Examples of sin as nature and state are Psalm 51:5, "in sin my mother conceived me" (NASB); Romans 7:17, "sin which dwells in me" (NASB); and 1 John 1:8, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves" (NASB).

This concept explains why some Israelite animal sacrifices, prefiguring Christ's sacrifice, were offered as expressions of joy when expiation or atonement (*Piel* of *kpr*) and forgiveness for specific sins was not needed (Lev. 7:11–17: thanksgiving, votive, and freewill subcategories of well-being and peace offerings; cf. chap. 3).⁹ Even human praise is tainted by sin and needs the mediation of Christ's sacrifice in order to be acceptable to God.¹⁰

Other biblical passages speak of "sin" as specific violations of God's

law: "sin [*hamartía*] is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4); "All wrongdoing [literally, "unrighteousness"] is sin" (1 John 5:17); "Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin" (James 4:17, NASB); "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). Sin in this sense can be a verb: "If anyone of the ordinary people among you sins unintentionally in doing



any one of the things that by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done" (Lev. 4:27); "No one who abides in him sins" (present tense of *hamartáno*, 1 John 3:6). Sinning involves breach of one's relationship with God because it is out of harmony with His character of love (1 John 4:8) and His law, which is based on love (Matt. 22:37–40).

Sins, as violations of God's law, can be actions or thoughts (Matt. 5:21–30). They can be deliberate (Lev. 6:2, 3) or inadvertent and unintentional (Lev. 4).

But they are never simply automatic. In the ancient Israelite ritual system, which dealt with many aspects of human faultiness, the only automatic human conditions that required ritual remedies were some kinds of physical ritual impurities (e.g., menstruation, nocturnal emission) that excluded persons from contact with God's inner sphere of holiness and life centered at

the sanctuary (e.g., Lev. 12–15; Num. 5:1–4; Deut. 23:10, 11). Physical ritual impurities, such as corpse contamination (voluntary), scaly skin disease (so-called leprosy; involuntary), and healthy or abnormal genital flows (voluntary or involuntary) belonged to a conceptual category associated with "the birth-death cycle that comprises mortality,"¹¹ that is, the fallen human state that has resulted from sinful action (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12; 6:23).

Because physical impurities were not violations of divine commands, they were not moral faults requiring forgiveness, as shown by the fact that persons who offered purification

offerings (so-called sin offerings) for severe physical impurities received "atonement" ("purgation") that only resulted in physical ritual purity. This cleansing was not prerequisite to forgiveness, which such individuals did not need (e.g., Lev. 12:6–8; 14:19, 20; 15:15; contrast forgiveness in 4:20, 26, 31, 35 in cases of sinful actions).¹² Although Christians can learn from these physical impurities and their remedies, which show us that Christ's sacrifice ultimately redeems us from our sinful

state of mortality (1 Cor. 15:52, 53; cf. Ps. 103:3: “who heals all your diseases”; John 3:16 “eternal life” [emphasis supplied]), the ritual remedies for them no longer apply because Christ’s ministry is in God’s heavenly temple (Heb. 7–10), which cannot be affected by human physical states as the earthly sanctuary and temple could.

Some well-meaning and otherwise well-informed Christian interpreters have mistakenly interpreted some Israelite sacrifices that removed physical ritual impurities, such as the red heifer remedy for corpse contamination, as rituals that atoned for people when they had committed sins. For example, while the NRSV correctly understands the end of Numbers 19:9 to label the burning of the red heifer as “a purification offering” (cf. NJPS “for cleansing”), the KJV, the RSV, the NKJV, the NASB, and the NIV incorrectly render it “purification/purifying from/for sin.”¹³ Because physical impurities can be automatic, reading “sin” in a case of physical impurity can lead to the wrong conclusion that committing sins can be automatic. Thus the great preacher Charles Spurgeon interpreted the red heifer ritual: “Who has lived for a single day in this base world, without discovering that in all his actions he commits sin, in everything to which he puts his hand, he receives, as well as imparts, some degree of defilement?”¹⁴

Not all human imperfection, even in the sphere of conscious activity, can be regarded as sin. Human life is fraught with all kinds of nonsinful imperfections due to our limitations of skill, knowledge,

memory, physical coordination, and so on. For example, while a worker should do his best (cf. Eccles. 9:10; 2 Tim. 2:15), there is no indication that he needs forgiveness from God if something goes wrong or is not absolutely perfect (cf. Jer. 18:4).

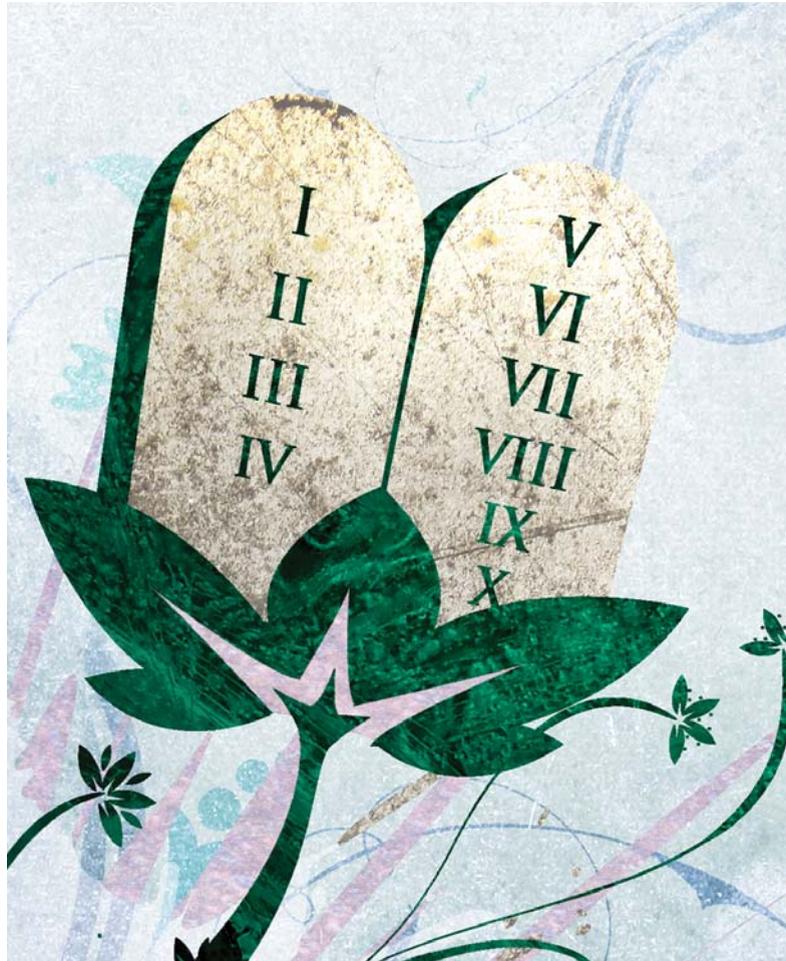
The bottom line is that human depravity, as pervasive as it is, is not a valid argument to justify sinning. Righteousness by faith does not mean

life is progressive acceptance of God’s precious gift of victory over our fallen natures by partaking of the transforming power of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:1–4). *By God’s grace*, Christians can and should keep their sinful natures under control (1 Cor. 9:27).

According to Paul, “since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). This is not false assurance; rather, it is reconciliation with God that results in true hope “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (v. 5). So when God converts people by His grace, He brings them into harmony with His character and law of love (cf. 1 John 4:8; Matt. 22:37–40) by progressively pouring love into their hearts through His Holy Spirit.

The role of the Spirit is essential for conversion. The Spirit provides spiritual reorientation that can metaphorically be termed “new birth” (John 3:5–8; Titus 3:4–7; cf. Rom. 8). This change of disposition is an integral, essential part of conversion along with forgiveness for past sins (cf. Rom. 3:25).

Jesus came to save His people not *in* their sins, but *from* their sins (Matt. 1:21). For Christians, committing sins is not inevitable. According to Jude 24, God “is able to keep you from falling.” John writes, “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin” (1 John 2:1). He recognizes that God’s children may occasionally fall in their progressive journey toward harmony with God’s character, so he adds in the same verse: “But if anyone



freedom from sin in order to continue to sin. Rather, it is freedom from sin to live a life of obedience to God.

2. Obedience

Is obedience to God possible? Is it legalism to emphasize obedience?

In Romans 3:10–18, Paul describes the pre-conversion spiritual state, showing that all human beings need God’s gift of justification through Christ. An indispensable part of the Christian

does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Nevertheless, John recognizes the possibility of not committing sins, or it would make no sense for him to encourage people to abstain from this. Keep in mind that we are talking here about development and maturation of *character*, not sinless perfection of *nature*, which nobody receives until glorification.

In the New Testament, disobedience to God's law is sin (1 John 3:4), and this includes the Old Testament moral law. Even in Old Testament times, God intended His law to be kept. Thus Moses encouraged the Israelites to be loyal to God because obedience to His law is accessible (Deut. 30:11–14). Of course they could not obey God in their own strength. But if they truly loved the Lord with all their heart, soul, and might (Deut. 6:5), their internalized heart relationship with Him would have been like the "new covenant" experience, in which God puts His law within people and writes it on their hearts (Jer. 31:33).¹⁵

Those who think they must go on continually sinning until Jesus comes tend to brand as legalistic "perfectionism" the biblical teaching of overcoming sin through God's Holy Spirit and "Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).¹⁶ But obedience to God's law by grace through faith is not legalism, and God empowers the level of obedience that He requires (1 Cor. 10:13). Without this divine empowerment, obedience is impossible. Thus, commenting on 1 John, Hans La Rondelle has observed, "To John the life of holiness is to be lived on the level of miracle. The impossibility of sinning therefore to John does not spring forth from any inherent metaphysical quality but from the reality of the victorious and cleansing union of faith with the Crucified and Risen One who is essentially holy and righteous."¹⁷

It is true that Christ wants "to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27), but it is Christ who takes responsibility

for purifying the church (vv. 25, 26). His "bride" is able to make herself ready for "the marriage of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:7) because

"to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure"—
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints
(v. 8, emphasis supplied).

So "righteous deeds" are a gift from God. What we are responsible for is receiving the gift, which involves cooperating with God. ❏

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- 1 Except as otherwise stated, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version.
 - 2 On legalism and the purpose of God's law, see Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 310–312.
 - 3 Roy Gane, *Who's Afraid of the Judgment?* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2006), 106, 109; Erwin Gane, *Jesus Only: Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Roseville, CA: Amazing Facts, 2005), 48.
 - 4 See, for example, "We must understand this fact of being born with dead spirits in order to realize that we need a Savior. It is this unavoidable, intractable sin which makes it utterly impossible for any person to be able to please God." Colleen Tinker, "If What You Believe Is Not Biblical Would You Want to Know?" *Proclamation!* 7/6 (2006): 18.
 - 5 See Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Crisis*, rev. ed. (Glendale, AZ: Life Assurance Ministries, 1995), 201; Ratzlaff, "Christ Follower, You Are RIGHTEOUS," *Proclamation!* 7/4 (2006): 16; David Dykes, "Leave the Shadows [The Reality is Christ]," *Proclamation!* 7/6 (2006): 10, 11.
 - 6 "Because we as humans naturally have dead spirits which are in bondage to 'the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient' (Ephesians 2:2), we can never emulate Jesus. He could never be our 'example' of how to become perfect. He can only be our substitute." Tinker, "What You Believe," 18.
 - 7 See Fernando Canale, *The Cognitive Principle of Christian Theology: A Hermeneutical Study of the Revelation and Inspiration of the Bible* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Lithotech, 2005), 189.
 - 8 While these propensities remain in our underlying bodily *nature*, God can give us the victory over them in our *character* (cf. 1 Cor. 9:27). Thus Ellen G. White wrote that through faith in Christ, "it is our privilege to be partakers of the divine nature, and so escape the corruption that is in the world through lust. Then we are cleansed from all sin, all defects of character. We need not retain one sinful propensity. . . .
"As we partake of the divine nature, hereditary and cultivated tendencies to wrong are cut away

from the character, and we are made a living power for good. Ever learning of the divine Teacher, daily partaking of His nature, we co-operate with God in overcoming Satan's temptations." *Review and Herald*, April 24, 1900.

- 9 Cf. Lev. 17:11, where all sacrificial blood, including that of the well-being offering (v.5, 6, 10, 12) provides some kind of expiation or ransom (*Piel of kpr*).
- 10 "The religious services, the prayers, the praise, the penitent confession of sin ascend from true believers as incense to the heavenly sanctuary, but passing through the corrupt channels of humanity, they are so defiled that unless purified by blood, they can never be of value with God. They ascend not in spotless purity, and unless the Intercessor, who is at God's right hand, presents and purifies all by His righteousness, it is not acceptable to God." Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, bk. 1 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), 344.
- 11 Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and Its Place in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 49.
- 12 On physical ritual impurities and their relationship to sins, see Roy Gane, *Altar Call* (Berrien Springs, MI: Diadem, 1999), 115–121; Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 221, 222, 224–230; Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 198–202.
- 13 On the name of the sacrifice as "purification" rather than "sin" offering, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, Anchor Bible 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 253, 254.
- 14 Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1951), 359. It is true that in an extended sense the salient aspects of this sacrifice teach us about Christ's redemption from all sin pollution, including that which results from committing sins (see Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4 [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948], 120–123). Recognizing that this is an extended sense helps to avoid confusion of categories by which the "automatic" aspect of physical ritual impurity is incorrectly carried over to committing sins.
- 15 See Skip MacCarty, "New Covenant DNA in the Old Covenant," *In Granite or Ingrained?: What the Old and New Covenants Reveal about the Gospel, the Law, and the Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2007), 37–56.
- 16 See Dale Ratzlaff, *The Cultic Doctrine of Seventh-Day Adventists* (Glendale, AZ: Life Assurance Ministries, 1996), 212–216.
- 17 Hans K. La Rondelle, *Andrews University Monographs Studies in Religion*, vol. 3, *Perfection and Perfectionism: A Dogmatic-Ethical Study of Biblical Perfection and Phenomenal Perfectionism*, (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press), 233.

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