



Articles and Sermons :: Legalism, License, Lordship and Liberty - Frank Viola

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“The problem with legalists is that not enough people have confronted them and told them to get lost.”

~ Chuck Swindoll

When my editor read the pre-publication manuscript of REVISE US AGAIN, he told me that my chapter called “The Three Gospels” had a huge impact on him.

“History,” Martin Luther said, “is like a drunk man on a horse. No sooner does he fall off on the left side, does he mount again and fall off on the right.”

The same can be said about the Christian life. (So it seems to me anyway.)

In the chapter entitled “The Three Gospels,” I discuss three distinct “gospels” (messages) that many contemporary Christians have accepted.

Some have accepted the gospel of legalism. Reformed people tend to restrict legalism to be the attempt to earn salvation by human works. But for the genuine Christian who is saved by grace, legalism goes much deeper than that.

Legalism

Legalists are people who believe that salvation is by grace alone, but sanctification comes by their own efforts of trying to be a “good Christian.”

Legalists tend to push their own personal standards onto everyone else. They are quick to judge other people’s motives, thinking the worst of them and their intentions. They confuse obedience with trying to serve God in their own strength. They demand other people do things that they themselves would never carry out. They regard the sins of others as more severe and grievous than their own. (Philip Yancey described the legalist perfectly when he wrote, “Christians get very angry toward other Christians who sin differently than they do.”)

Legalists also feel that it’s their right to become intrusive meddlers, or as Peter put it condemningly, “busybodies in other men’s matters” (1 Peter 4:15, KJV). They are blind to their own self-righteousness, and they pride themselves on being “clean” on the outside (without realizing that they are defiled on the inside). For all of these reasons, legalists unwittingly bring a lot of pain and heartache into the lives of others, yet sadly they seem to be out of touch with his.

Forgive the personal reference, but when I was in my teens, I came to the Lord through a legalistic denomination. I was fed a steady diet of the gospel of legalism and was surrounded by legalists. Thus I used to be a legalist without realizing it. But God was merciful.

Libertinism

In reaction to legalism and the devastation that it brings to other people, some have accepted the gospel of libertinism. Libertines are folks who live the way they want and have skirted the Lordship of Christ and all that it means. They are apt to justify carnality by pulling the “grace card,” the “I’m free in Christ” card, and the “don’t judge me” card. For the libertine, grace becomes license to live in the flesh and silence their conscience.

(Regarding the “judge not” card, the Bible gives us a sharp paradox on the matter of judging. There are scores of texts that exhort us to judge and scores of texts that forbid us to judge. I have written a blog post that I will release sometime in the future that resolves this paradox. It’s tentatively called To Judge or Judge Not?)

Some libertines have rationalized to themselves that they can continue to practice a particular transgression and God is “kewl wit dat,” regardless of the carnage it brings. (A mark of sin is that it produces unnecessary pain in the lives

of others. Sin and love are the exact opposites. Love is benefiting others at the expense of yourself. Sin is benefiting yourself at the expense of others. Sin is selfishness; love is selflessness. Love is a greater force than sin â€” Godâ€™s life is more powerful than Satanâ€™s nature â€” and â€œlove covers a multitude of sins.â€)

Some libertines have gone so far into deception that they have reinvented Jesus in their own image to justify their rebellion against the Lord and clothe it with spiritual talk. Others have gone further off the beam and have become practical atheists.

Note that there are degrees of legalism and degrees of libertinism. But these descriptions should give the general flavor of each.

In short, the libertine lives as if there is no God. The legalist lives as though she/he is God to everyone else.

Both attitudes are incompatible with the life of Christ.

Complicating Factors

What complicates the situation further is that . . .

The legalist doesnâ€™t know that he/she is a legalist and tends to view all non-legalists as libertines.

The libertine doesnâ€™t know that she/he is a libertine and tends to view all non-libertines as legalists.

Without the Holy Spiritâ€™s illumination, this deception is difficult if not impossible to break.

Very often, the root cause behind going into legalism or libertinism lies in the fact that people donâ€™t understand that they are unconditionally accepted by God in Christ. The legalist doubts it, and the libertine presumes on it.

Lordship & Liberty

In â€œThe Three Gospels,â€ I discuss both the gospel of legalism and the gospel of libertinism in great detail, comparing and contrasting them and giving examples for each.

I then contrast these two â€œgospelsâ€ with the gospel of Jesus and Paul, which I call the gospel of Lordship and Liberty. And I explain how those two words go hand-in-hand.

But the gospel of the New Testament is rooted in reality â€” the real Jesus â€” and it sets us free from the defilement of the flesh and the self-righteousness of the fleshâ€”both of which come off the same tree. Both of which bring bondage and cause untold pain to others. For both violate love, the nature of Godâ€™s own life.

One of the things Iâ€™ve learned in my spiritual journey is that the closer someone gets to Jesus Christ, the less judgmental, self-righteous, harsh-toward-others, and selfish he or she will be.

We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. And we all need Jesus Christ to forgive, deliver, and keep us each from both the defiling acts of the flesh and the self-righteousness of the flesh.