

Romans (85)
The Christian under God's Law (cont.)

Today we will consider some matters of which everyone one of us should be thoroughly informed. It will be repetition for many of you, but repetition is good. I could perhaps say that if you are not able to teach another respecting these matters, then you need to give your undivided attention to what is said, for you do not understand as yet the importance and implications of these matters. Our text of Romans 13:8-10 lends itself, perhaps even necessitates the need to emphasize what we will address today.

Last Lord's Day we began to consider the meaning and implications of the paragraph of Romans 13:8-10. Here it is once again:

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery", "You shall not murder", "You shall not steal", "You shall not covet", and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom. 13:8-10)

We addressed last week the first clause of verse 8 and touched on the matter of indebtedness and falling behind in one's financial obligations. As Christians we are to be faithful to our financial commitments. We then addressed the one debt from which we can never free ourselves, which is the debt of love to others. We then addressed what it is to love another. "Love" in the Scriptures is (most frequently) *not a feeling of affection* for another, but rather love is a *description of action* toward another. Biblical love is active, not passive. Love is *doing something* more than it is *feeling something*. That is why if you say "I love God" yet do not the things He says, you show yourself to be deceiving yourself. 1 John 2:4ff read, "Whoever says 'I know Him' but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps His word, in him truly the love of God is perfected." Here we see that the true Christian is a keeper of God's law. The biblical definition of love is to order one's relationships according to God's law. 2 John 6 reads, "***This is love, that we walk according to His commandments.***" The law of God prescribes to us how we are to love others.

We may now look to the explanation of why we should love one another. It is the same idea we just read in John's first and second epistles. We read in Romans 13:8, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, ***for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.***" The one who has loves another, that is, has ordered his relationship according to God's law, is one who has fulfilled the law of God. We may conclude from this statement of verse 8 that ***Christians are to be concerned about fulfilling the law of God.***

This is important. For there are many evangelicals, those who profess to believe the Bible, who claim they believe and love God and have Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, who believe that Christians are not to look to the law of God as a rule for the Christian life. They in effect sever the biblical idea of love that is vitally connected and associated with God's law, and deny that the law of God has a role in governing their behavior. They claim that rather than the law of God governing the Christian life, "love" is to do so, or "grace" is to do so. But this is wrong, for the law of God defines and prescribes what love is and what love does.

Now when we speak of the Christian's understanding of his relation to the law of God, there are two possible but common errors that must always be kept in mind. And this is the substance of the matter that we are rehearsing today. There is (1) the danger of the error of antinomianism and there is (2) the danger of the error of legalism. Let us define and describe these two ideas.

1. The danger of the error of antinomianism. This is the wrong belief that the Christian is not under God's law as a rule of life. This error commonly results in the delusion that it does not matter how a Christian lives, for he is not under God's law, but under grace. This is the great error of much of evangelicalism today. They have twisted the idea of God's grace to mean that what the Christian does is in his life has no bearing on

his salvation. Faith is reduced to a common ascent or superficial “belief” or “faith” in Jesus that is disconnected from how he must live. “Because I once believed on Jesus, I am safe. My sins are forgiven. It does not matter whether I keep God’s law or not, because I am saved apart from works.”

And so, *antinomianism* is “against” (*anti-*) God’s law (*-nomos*, Greek for “law”). The antinomian argues that because Christians are under God’s grace, that the law of God is not a rule of life for the believer. And so some say that the New Testament believer has no obligation to the law of God, but we read in our text (Rom. 13:8) that Paul wrote that the fulfilling the law is desirable and that the law of God is fulfilled when one truly “loves” another.

Our Lord Jesus taught that the law of God abides in its authority over his disciples. He said,

¹⁷Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ¹⁸For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. ¹⁹Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:17-20)¹

Paul wrote that we owe a debt of love to others; we are paying that debt when we are fulfilling the law of God in our relationship with others. The apostle then cited a number of the Ten Commandments. These were originally on the second stone tablet that God had given Moses. God had written His laws in stone with His own finger. God meant what He wrote and delivered to His people. We read in Romans 13:9ff:

⁹For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery”, “You shall not murder”, “You shall not steal”, “You shall not covet”, and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom. 13:8-10)

Now if you are real sharp, you noticed that Paul listed these commandments in a different order that they way that they are listed in the books of Moses, that had been written in Hebrew. The first two commandments that he lists are in reverse order. “You shall not commit adultery” is the 7th commandment and “You shall not murder” is the 6th commandment. Actually Paul is following the order of the commandments as they are listed in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX). Paul indicated that there were other laws in addition to the ones he listed, for he wrote, “And if there is any other commandment.” And there are other commandments. He was not providing a complete list here.

The apostle declares that when Christians truly love others that they are fulfilling God’s law. Paul is echoing our Lord’s personal teaching. We read of the occasion in Matthew 25:34ff.

³⁴But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, ³⁶“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On those two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

¹ Here Jesus was not referring to exceeding the righteousness of the Pharisees in that we have His righteousness imputed to us through faith alone, although that is certainly true. But we would need to look elsewhere for that truth. Here our Lord was telling His disciples that their practical righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees otherwise they would not enter the Kingdom of God. How can this be? Were not the Pharisees extremely righteous? How can we out do them? The fact is that they were not all that righteous, for theirs was only an outward show, an external conformity to God’s law. In contrast to them the very heart and mind of the true Christian exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees, for their practical righteousness is the outworking of what was wrought in them by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

Some say that we are not to keep the law, but rather we are to love one another. No, Jesus and Paul both said that loving others is being done when you order your relationship according to God's law. God's law instructs us and describes how we may love God and love our neighbor. Again, that is what John wrote, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments." (1 John 5:2). "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous." (1 John 5:3). "And this is love, that we walk after his commandments." (2 John 6). The law of God prohibits doing any harm to one's neighbor; therefore, Paul could write, "love is the fulfillment of the law."

And so we see that this passage corrects the error of antinomianism, the belief that the Christian is not under the law of God in any way. But those who differ with us would respond, "But does not the Scripture say that we are not under law, but under grace?" Yes it does state that truth. We read in Romans 6:14, "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." But antinomians misinterpret what Paul was teaching. He was not declaring that Christians are not under the law as a rule of life, as we see in our text of Romans 13:8ff, but rather Paul was declaring that **Christians are no longer under the law as a covenant of works**. But the Scriptures do teach that Christians are under the authority of God's law in the covenant of grace in which we relate with God through Jesus Christ. Paul stated this regarding himself in 2 Corinthians

¹⁹For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; ²⁰and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; ²¹to those who are without law, as without law (**not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ**), that I might win those who are without law; ²²to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. ²³Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you. (1 Cor. 9:19-22)

Paul sought the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles. He ordered his life according to the Law of Moses when with the Jews, which would have included the ceremonial laws within the Mosaic Law. But when he was among the Gentiles, he did not order his life according to the Mosaic Law for that would have alienated the Gentiles. But he made it clear that it was only the ceremonial laws of God that he was not observing, for wherever he was, whether before the Jews or the Gentiles, he was under the moral law of God toward Christ. In other words, His life was governed by Jesus Christ according to the moral law of God.

We need to explain this matter further, the understanding that Christians are no longer under the covenant of works before God, but rather under the covenant of grace, and how this effects our relationship to God and His law. This is at the heart of what is known as **covenant theology**. When God created our first parents, Adam and Eve, He placed all the human race under the responsibility to keep His law perfectly as a condition for eternal life. God's law is a reflection of His holy nature, and in order to dwell with God and be in a right relationship with God, we must be holy for He is holy.

Our confession states the biblical truth in this way:

God gave to Adam a law of universal obedience written in his heart, and a particular precept of not eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.²

Adam broke that covenant with works, and in doing so, brought the condemnation of God upon the entire human race. The covenant of works remained in force, but to be or become right with God through that covenant was no longer possible to fallen man. God's law could only condemn us. It is impossible for sinners to be saved from sin by keeping them keeping God's law. All mankind are born into this world for having broken this covenant of works in Adam.

² *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, Art. 19, par. 1.

But through the grace of God in Jesus Christ God has delivered true believers from relating to God according to the covenant of works. Jesus Christ came and kept the covenant of works before God on behalf of his people. And so we who believe on Jesus Christ are no longer under the law as the covenant of works. Rather, Jesus confirmed a new covenant by which all of His people relate with God. Christians relate to God under this covenant of grace, not under the covenant of works. But God has enabled us under grace through the power of the Holy Spirit to live according to God's law while under grace.

But sadly, many evangelicals today have been taught that we are not under law in any way whatsoever. This is a common error among many, even the majority of Bible-believing Christians today. They wrongly believe that because Christ died for us that we are no longer to look to or be governed by the moral law of God. This has been an error common among professing Christians since the first century. There are New Testament books written to counter the error of antinomianism, including the Epistles of John, James, and Jude. By the way, there are also New Testament books written to correct the error of legalism, including Galatians and Romans.

Now there is a fairly new form of this kind of antinomian teaching or theology that has come to be known as "New Covenant Theology." (This is unfortunate that they use this expression, for we who are reformed Baptists who understand the abiding authority of God's law, confess that we relate to God according to the new covenant.) Those who hold to "new covenant theology" argue that the Christian is not under law to God in any way. These people are often Baptists. They hold to the 5 points of Calvinism, in other words, they believe the doctrines of grace. But they teach that the Christian is not under the law of God in any way. They say that the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount did not deliver His disciples from a wrong interpretation and application of the Law of Moses³, but rather from the rule of the law itself. But this is wrong. God's law as interpreted in the Holy Scriptures and understood and applied under Christ remains the standard of conduct for the New Testament Christian.

Now some can live as Christians believing this error of "new covenant theology" and still do somewhat well in the Christian life.⁴ They do not show regard to the law, but in their becoming born again, the Spirit has put His law on their hearts. They keep the righteousness of the law although they do not do so by direct design. They do so by the Holy Spirit working through the new nature He has given them, without a purposeful intention on their part to live by the rule of God's law. But their theology does, nevertheless, have a negative impact on the way they make decisions, view themselves and their relationship with Jesus Christ, and it effects how they do evangelism and training in discipleship.

There are others, however, that maintain this error of new covenant theology who do not fare as well. By not seeing that Jesus Christ rules over them according to God's moral law, they are lax in their moral understanding and practice. They lack a moral compass. They do not have a moral voice in their families or among their friends and acquaintances. Some have taken the position so far that they say there is no law whatsoever as far as God is concerned, only love and forgiveness. They fail to proclaim the law of God in their so-called gospel presentation. They promise forgiveness of sins without the need or importance of being delivered from the power of sin. Repentance is often not proclaimed or taught, or else it is redefined in a manner that is void of reference to God's law. The result is that they excuse sin in themselves and others. In time they may indulge in sin to excess. They permit or excuse sin in others assuming it does really matter touching salvation, for "we are not under the law." As a consequence, they get themselves into all manner of error and sin. They justify their sinful behavior by saying that we are not under law, but under grace. They teach professing Christians who totally disregard the law of God that they are, nevertheless, saved from sin and have eternal life. They believe that as long as they believe in Christ, they may live in sin without consequences. This is the error of antinomianism and evangelicalism has been captivated with this error, by and large.

And so antinomianism describes people who say that they believe in grace, but that they are "against law" or "lawless." Antinomianism describes a view of life that one can have Jesus as Savior but not as Lord. Antinomianism, or lawlessness, is the spirit of the world. Antinomianism is in the church; it is present when

³ This is the view of classical reformed theology and espoused in D. Martin Lloyd-Jones' classic commentary, *The Sermon on the Mount*.

⁴ There are many fine Christian people who espouse this errant teaching. One such is John Reisinger who is one of the leading proponents of "new covenant theology." His brother, Ernest Reisinger, stood strongly against his brother's teaching, espousing the classical reformed and historical confessional view of the law.

people claim to be saved but choose to live in violation of God's commandments. Again our *Baptist Confession of 1689* espouses the abiding role and rule of the law of God for the Christian. Here are three additional paragraphs from that one we considered earlier that address the matter directly:

Paragraph 5. The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof, and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it; neither doth Christ in the Gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation. (Rom. 13:8-10; James 2:8, 10, 11; Matt. 5:17-19; Rom. 3:31).

Paragraph 6. Although true believers be not under the law as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned, yet it is of great use to them as well as to others, in that as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their natures, hearts, and lives, so as examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against, sin; together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ and the perfection of his obedience; it is likewise of use to the regenerate to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin; and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve, and what afflictions in this life they may expect for them, although freed from the curse and unallayed rigour thereof. The promises of it likewise show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof, though not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works; so as man's doing good and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law and not under grace. (Rom. 6:14; Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:20; 6:12-14; 7:7; 8:1; 10:4; 1 Pet. 3:8-13).

Paragraph 7. Neither are the aforementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but do sweetly comply with it, the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely and cheerfully which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done. (Gal. 3:21; Ezek. 36:27)

There are different ways in which antinomians justify their belief and practice. **J. I. Packer** in his book, *Concise Theology*, speaks of six different forms of antinomianism. We can only mention five briefly.

1. Dualistic Antinomianism appeared in the early heresy of Gnosticism that existed in the early church. The New Testament books of 2 Peter and Jude addressed this error. These Gnostics set aside the law of God in this way: They taught that salvation was for the soul only, so it did not matter if you sinned with your body. They would have argued something like this, "As long as my heart is right with God, it does matter what I do." The same kind of thinking is present today. Again, this is probably the form of error that Jude addressed. They had turned the grace of God in to licentiousness.

2. Spirit-centered antinomianism puts such trust in the Holy Spirit's inward prompting as to deny any need to be taught by the law how to live. This was a common error in Protestant countries for the first 150 years after the beginning of the Reformation. This error is also common today. In order to justify their sinful behavior, they say, "I know that the Bible forbids me to do this thing, but I prayed about it." Pastors commonly hear this excuse for sin. They also have turned the grace of God in to licentiousness.

3. Christ-centered antinomianism says that God sees no sin in believers, because they are in Christ, Who kept the law on their behalf, therefore what they do makes no difference as long as they believe on Christ. This, too, is commonly assumed today. One can sound so spiritual and yet sin carelessly with this false reasoning. They have turned the grace of God in to licentiousness.

4. Situationist antinomianism says that the motive and intention of love is all that God now requires of Christians. Because love is preeminent, specific laws can be set aside. Love, not law, is the principle thing. So law may be set aside, *and once that is done, you can redefine love in any way that will justify one's behavior.* "But we love one another" is an expression that has served sinners well to mollify their consciences as they sin against God's law. They have turned the grace of God in to licentiousness.

[**5. Dialectical antinomianism** is an error common among “scholars” and theological liberals. This is a sophisticated excuse for educated sinners. The specific words of Scripture are used by God to lead to His true Word in Spirit, in which the Christian is led to behave according to the fresh word received from God. To the convenience and delight of sinners, the “fresh word” frequently excuses what the Scriptures expressly condemns.]

6. Dispensational antinomianism teaches that since we are now living in the age of grace, we are no longer under obligation to keep the law in any way. To keep God’s law in any form is viewed as legalism and contrary to the teaching of grace. This often results in licentious grace.

This last understanding of the relationship of the law of God to the believer is perhaps most common among Bible believing Christians. Most would object to what we are saying by saying, “Do not the Scriptures clearly say that we are not under law but under grace?” And if one look at a number of passages *from their perspective with their assumptions*, it would appear that they are right. But when one examines their teaching and the fruit of their teaching, the nature of the error emerges in a number of ways. The result of this errant teaching is that we have “lawlessness” among Christians with respect to how they live before God. They claim to “believe”, but they live with no sense of an objective standard of behavior as Christians. They are a law unto themselves. Many times this results in the errant thought that a license to sin is given to the Christian. “Although it is not right to sin”, they would say, if pressed they would say that it actually doesn’t really matter with respect to salvation, “after all, we are saved by grace and not by works.” Let us then take to heart the dangers of error God’s teaching about law and grace. Let us be on guard against *antinomianism*.

2. The danger of the error of legalism. What is legalism according to the Scriptures? Legalism may be seen in one of several forms:

- (a) Legalism is present when works are viewed as meritorious in order to obtain or retain of God's favor or blessing.
- (b) Legalism is present when extra-biblical demands are placed upon the believer or unbeliever in order to obtain or retain of God’s favor or blessing.
- (c) Legalism is present when extra-biblical requirements are imposed as a basis of fellowship with other “believers.”
- (d) Legalism is present when one trusts in one's own ability to obey God apart from the empowering grace of God through the Holy Spirit.

And so, with respect to obeying God’s law, we are not to strive to obey the law of God as a way to obtain merit before God, that would be the error of *legalism*. But every true Christian should strive to order his/her life according to the law of God, for this what it is to love God and to love one another. Paul, the Christian, could say, “I delight in the law of God, in my inner being” (Rom. 7:22), and “I myself serve the law of God with my mind” (Rom. 7:25).

But let us also be on guard against legalism. For those of us who have a high regard for God’s law may fall into this error as easily as others may fall into the error of licentiousness or antinomianism.

Legalism is a common error among religionists. This way of religion assumes that one’s way of living “merits” God’s blessing. This way of religion assumes that one is able through his own inherent goodness and his own effort apart from grace to attain to God’s standards. This way of religion has a set of rules or laws which are not sanctioned in Scripture but which he observes and would impose on others to observe as well.

Legalists have characteristics in common with one another. **(1) A legalist focuses on outward conformity to a legal standard.** Years ago I ran in legalistic circles of American fundamentalism. I can say that our focus was on things outside--issues of appearance, outward behavior--but wicked attitudes were largely unaddressed. **(2) A legalist is little concerned about inward righteousness.** Appearances are most important. If things appear okay on the outside, he is quite content. He is unaware and unconcerned about the condition of his heart. He can get all worked up about the sin out there, the sin in society, but he isn’t too concerned about the sin *in the heart*. **(3) A legalist is ignorant and void of true righteousness.** Christianity is a heart religion.

For this is the arena in which God works. If we only lament over our actions and not our nature which leads to the action, there is something terribly defective about our faith. I am greatly encouraged when I hear of one who is troubled about his thoughts and his attitudes. These are the things which the Spirit of God addresses and convicts a man. **(4) A legalist is actually only concerned about himself and has little love for others.** He is unmoved by the injustice that others encounter. He lacks love for his neighbor. But he is meticulously observant about the minutest details of his life. **(5) A legalist loves recognition, desiring foremost to have the esteem of others.** He is ultimately more concerned what men think of him than what God might think of him. Or worse, he assumes if man will recognize his worth and value, it only reflects what God must think of him as well. He will judge according to outward standards of morality only and assume that God does too. **(6) Legalists corrupt all that they influence.** They neither have true religion themselves nor can they produce it in others. They are void of spiritual life. They are as defiling tombs which for Jews would cause uncleanness if contact were made. But take note, this ability to corrupt is not recognized by most. People come into contact with these legalists and their way of thinking and are defiled or affected by them without being aware they had been corrupted. **(7) A legalist imposes rules on others that he does not observe himself and he has no desire or means to help them under his load.** They add to the Word of God; but they exempt themselves. This is one matter that causes many U.S. citizens to be outraged about their Congress. Over the years Congress passed laws passed which were imposed on the citizens such as labor laws, civil rights laws, affirmative action with respect to hiring, tax laws, but Congress itself, and congressmen, wrote into the laws that they were exempt. This same thing is what Jesus condemned in these religious leaders. They were quick to impose the hard laws, and they did so without consideration of how oppressive the rules would be. But they themselves, were exempt. **(8) A legalist prevents others from seeing truth for they themselves are strangers to it.** These men were so blind they did not recognize the Savior. Why? Because in their own eyes they did not really need a Saviour. They were living before God based on the merit of their works and they thought God had accepted them because of their works. **(9) A legalist will persecute the people of God.** The history of the Church is a history of legalism in the guise of Christianity persecuting the true people of God. Read *Fox's Book of Martyrs*. Read any church history and you will observe this is true. **(10) The legalist will suffer the judgment of God.** He will stand condemned on the Day of Judgment.

Consider the pronouncement of our Lord Jesus upon the Jewish legalists of that day:

²³“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! (Matt. 23:23f)

Our Lord affirms that they were right in tithing of all they had. Their problem is that they had failed to do what was most important. They were in a legalistic manner requiring the smallest detail of life to be conformed to their rules, but they neglected the major themes and ideals of the kingdom.

Our Lord also condemned the Jewish leaders for *their superficial and shallow legalism that is also characterized by self-righteousness*.

²⁵“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. (Matt. 23:25f)

Our Lord then condemned the Jewish leaders for their self-righteousness and *their focus on externals rather than on matters of the heart*.

²⁷“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Matt. 23:27f)

These condemnations of our Lord reveal to us the nature, attitudes and practice of legalists.

The Antinomianism taught by Classical Dispensationalism

Here is more information about the error antinomianism which plagues evangelicalism largely due to the influence of classical dispensationalism and its teaching regarding God's law and grace. We would argue for historic reformed theology (which is the same as covenant theology) rather than dispensational theology, which was popularized in the 20th century.

Great error exists in the belief of many Christians that biblical law in any and all forms has no place in the life of the Christian due to the teaching of dispensationalism. This is unfortunately the position of many even most evangelical Christians and church attendees. "The law", they would say, "with any and all of its rules are not to be imposed upon Christians, for the Christian is under grace not law." The result of this errant teaching is that we have "lawlessness" among Christians with respect to how they live before God. They claim to "believe", but they live with no sense of an objective standard of behavior as Christians. They are a law unto themselves. Many times this results in the errant thought that a license to sin is given to the Christian. "Although it is not right to sin", they would say, if pressed they would say that it actually doesn't really matter with respect to salvation, "after all, we are saved by grace and not by works."

Much of today's wrong understanding of law and grace is the result of the influence and legacy of *classical dispensationalism*. Now, for those of you who are not familiar with that term, it is a reference to a system of belief about the Bible that was popularized toward the end of the 19th century by a Plymouth Brethren man named **J. N. Darby**. He had a great influence upon **C. I. Scofield**, of Scofield Bible fame, who in turn had great influence in shaping the belief system of a generation of evangelicals, including **Lewis Sperry Chafer** who founded Dallas Theological Seminary whose legacy was assumed by **John Walvoord** and **Charles Ryrie**. Most conservative evangelical pastors and teachers of the 20th century had their views of law and grace shaped directly or indirectly by the teaching held by these men. Their teaching is still predominant and is carried on into the people of the pew not only by pastors and teachers influenced by them, but through their books and study Bibles that have always sold quite well. It should be carefully noted that the term *classical dispensationalism* is used to distinguish these views from the position of others who would regard themselves as dispensationalist but repudiate strongly the views of law and grace these above men held. Noted among these *progressive dispensationalists* would be John MacArthur.

What was their position respecting law and grace? Well, it has been modified somewhat, but the major point was this, that the two systems of relating to God, law and grace, are so different in nature that the two can never co-exist. The Old Testament dispensation of law from Moses to Calvary was an age of law. But now is the age of grace. Law was law, and now grace is grace.

This resulted in some real interpretive problems. After all, if the age of grace began with Calvary or Pentecost, and everything before was under the dispensation of the law, what application is there for the Christian of Old Testament teaching? For that matter, what teaching of the Lord Jesus is for New Testament Christians since He was under the law Himself and was teaching Jews who themselves were still under law? The conclusion of the dispensationalists, Scofield, Chafer, Walvoord, and Ryrie, was that most of what Jesus taught His disciples is not to be regarded as authoritative teaching for Christians. Now again, their position has been modified somewhat because of justified opposition over the years, but historically this has been the position of dispensationalists respecting law and grace, most of the teachings of Jesus recorded in the gospels do not apply to the Christian. Scofield's footnote on the Sermon on the Mount declares that Jesus' teaching was given before the cross, and therefore does not contain teaching that directly instructs the Christian. If the Christian is to look for instruction on Christian living, he needs to turn to the epistles for grace teaching.⁵

Now, why am I saying this? To put down a certain group of teachers? No, by no means. In fact, there was a time when I believed and taught these very things. The reason that I bring this up is that most evangelical teachers and pastors have had their views of the law's relationship to the Christian shaped by the influence of the position I have just laid out.

⁵ See the *Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 1000.

This system of teaching respecting law and grace appears to be a very logical one and one taught by the Scriptures. And the manner in which some of these writers have set forward their teaching has reinforced their teaching to many others. They view law and grace as two principles distinct and even antithetical to one another. Often they were presented in by-polar terms, compared and mostly contrasted with one another. Here are Chafer's words:

Since law and grace are opposed to each other at every point, it is impossible for them to co-exist, either as a ground of acceptance before God or as a rule of life. Of necessity, therefore, the Scriptures of the New Testament which present the facts and scope of grace, both assume and directly teach that the law is done away. Consequently, it is not in force in the present age in any sense whatsoever. This present nullification of the law applies not only to the legal code of the Mosaic system and the law of the kingdom (i.e. the Sermon on the Mount—Lars) but to every possible application of the principle of the law.⁶

The result is that a certain view of grace is constructed and a certain view of law, and these become overarching principles by which the Scriptures are interpreted and taught.⁷

There are some basic problems with the positions that have just been described. Let me identify a few major ones:

1) They assume that any (legal) demand upon a Christian is to be viewed as "legalism" which is condemned in Scripture. Grace to them is viewed as *freedom* from obligation and the consequences of sin. Grace to them is viewed as freedom from obligation and the consequences of anything that may be seen as a law. But they misunderstand what legalism is. They would say legalism exists whenever a law is set before a Christian with a responsibility to do it else consequences will result. Because they view *grace* as releasing an individual of moral consequences, any demand placed upon the Christian is viewed as unbiblical and contrary to grace.

2) They assume that legalism exists anytime a teacher or preacher stresses a condition to be met in order for God's blessing to be received, a condition that requires personal effort on the part of a Christian. That position on law and grace assumes that the fulfilling of that obligation must necessarily be *meritorious* in nature. They would say, "*You cannot make a demand on a Christian to do something or that is works-righteousness.*" But this is a logical fallacy.

Let me explain. One can be required to meet certain conditions for blessing and yet if those conditions are met, it does not necessarily mean that you merited the favor, earned the blessing. The Lord Jesus Himself makes very great demands upon Christians in the seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 2& 3.⁸

3) They separate the Scriptures making some portions applicable to the Christian and some that are not. The basis of determination is whether or not principles of grace or principles of law are found, as they define them. Anything that suggests duty or obligation that carries threat or consequences is viewed as legal and opposed to grace, and is therefore to either be regarded as applicable to Jews before Calvary, or to a period of time in the future after the rapture, as they define it, when once again, they say, God will deal with people based upon law.

Now folks, if all this confuses you, I would not be surprised. You might say to me, "*but pastor, I don't hold to the things that you have described, therefore I do not see the relevance.*" Here is the relevance:

(1) Although you may not understand what I have been saying or maybe you do not embrace the views that I have been describing, but the point is this: the books you read or the pastor who teaches you may indeed hold to these views, and they will influence the way in which you and your family are preached to and taught. He may not say it openly. He may not even know that he himself is doing it, but he will tend to only teach and preach from those passages that seem to speak of grace *as he understands it*. Passages or teaching that might confront

⁶ See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Grace, The Glorious Theme* (Zondervan House, 1922, renewed 1950) p. 215.

⁷ See Chafer, *Grace*, pp. 25f, 86f, 91f, 106, 179f, 182ff. See also this errant hermeneutical principle advocated by Charles Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening* (Word Publishing, 1990) p. 57, 60.)

⁸ Cf. Rev. 2:5; 2:10; 3:2-4; 18-20; 2 Cor. 6:14-18.

or makes demands will be passed over as being *law* passages. The result is that the ability to confront sin and demand obedience, those passages that contain dire warnings of failure will be absent from that teachers subject matter. When this occurs the very authority of the Word has been stripped away. You will have a people who *feel* they are forgiven, think they are in grace, as they are being ravaged by sin and are in danger of God's judgment, and yet are unaware of it.

(2) The message of the gospel in evangelism is frequently stripped of its demand of repentance from sin and a full turning of one's life to God in Christ as a condition for salvation. The Bible teaches that unless a man believes on the Lord Jesus and unless a man repents of sin, turning from sin and submitting to the rule of God over His life through Jesus Christ, that man will die in his sins. But because it is falsely believed by many that salvation by grace means you are not to place any demands of taking action upon the sinner because that would be works-righteousness, the resulting "gospel" is a message is stripped of demands of repentance and contains only pleadings to "believe" only.

(3) I know this is a problem among evangelicals today by the common reaction to strong teaching and preaching that confronts sin, commands obedience, and places demands upon believers. The first reaction is suspicion and then maybe comes grief. There may be sin present that is held fast and dear, sin that has not been repented of, and when it is perceived that the preacher is saying you cannot have the blessing of God while this is present, disappointment and grief results. One can do one of two things. (1) *Either* he can go away "sorrowful", as say the rich young ruler whom Jesus demanded that he sell all his goods and give to the poor and then follow him. (2) *Or* he can take the easier course, accuse the preacher of being an unloving, self-righteous legalist who robs Christians of their joy by violating principles of grace and by making legalistic demands upon people. In this way he can dismiss the Word of God in its confronting authority.

May the Lord help us to understand rightly the law of God and its abiding moral rule for our lives. Let us be as Paul, who was never in a place or situation but in which he did regard himself as "under law to Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21).
