

The Roots of Legalism (by Stephen Nichols)

One of Martin Luther's many contributions concerns the Latin word *incurvitas*. This sounds like something a dentist might say to you as he pokes and prods in the molars. But it's not. It means "turned inward." It means that we are naturally selfish, self-centered, and self-absorbed. While all of those are damning enough, this condition of *incurvitas* has an even more telling effect. Because we are turned inward, we think we can achieve righteousness entirely on our own. So we strive, white-knuckling it, to achieve a right standing before God.

How many times have you heard someone say that as long as our good deeds outweigh our bad ones, God will welcome us open arms? How many religious systems are built upon works? How many people feel trapped by their incessant failed attempts to achieve perfection? Those are all cases of *incurvitas*. It's an epidemic.

Understanding this concept of *incurvitas* so well, Luther said, "It's very hard for a man to believe that God is gracious to him. The human heart can't grasp this." If we don't look to grace, we look to ourselves and to our own efforts.

Therein lie the roots of legalism.

The roots of legalism are in the sinful and fallen human heart itself. The heart manifests its sinful condition in our crippling desire to lean on our own merits and our own abilities in the attempt to somehow climb out of the miry pit of sin and reach all the way to heaven. We find grace to be far too bitter of a pill. It tells us we can never be good enough.

Curiously enough, the opposite of legalism also stumbles over grace. The opposite of legalism is antinomianism. This word includes the Greek prefix *anti-*, "against, in place of," and the Greek word *nomos*, "law." Theologically speaking, antinomians run away from any obligation to law or to any divine command. Antinomians are like James Bond: they have a license to sin. But that is the sad lie of antinomianism. It's not liberty—it's license.

The solution to legalism is not antinomianism. The solution to antinomianism is not legalism. The solution to both is grace, that thing Luther told us was hard to grasp. Exploring the roots of legalism further will serve not only to expose it, but also to display the brilliant and stunning contours of its solution, the grace of God.

Legalism in Scripture

The clearest expression of legalism in Scripture comes in the stories of the

antagonists in the Gospels, the Pharisees. In fact, thanks to them, we have the term pharisaical, defined as “hypocritical censorious self-righteousness.” Not one of those three things is a good thing. Taken together, we get a really bad thing. Another definition informs us that the term pharisaical means an extreme commitment to religious observance and ritual—apart from belief. Both aspects of the definition are crucial. The first is the striving and white-knuckling it to heaven. The second part takes us back to Luther’s quote and our aversion to grace—it just can’t be as simple as belief.

Christ confronted this tendency to be pharisaical on about every page in the Gospels. One such place is the parable concerning the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18. “I thank you that I am not like other men,” the Pharisee prays. There is the self-righteousness. The Pharisee further protests that he fasts and tithes. There is the external obedience.

In this parable, the Pharisee is contrasted with the tax collector. The tax collector simply prays, “Be merciful to me, a sinner!” There is the cry for grace.

A few verses later, the rich ruler comes to Christ. He too plays the part of a Pharisee. He too protests his self-righteousness. It seems that everywhere Christ goes, He meets Pharisees.

Ironically, the Pharisees, though they thought otherwise, were not truly concerned with the law of God. They actually set up a whole system of regulations to enable them to get around God’s law. They were experts at setting up loopholes. They had a man-made system of law to avoid the divine law. And they led Israel astray. Hence, we see why Jesus so vehemently opposed them and called them the false shepherds of Israel, as in the series of “woes” unleashed in Matthew 23.

Before his conversion, Paul was one such false shepherd. Paul was the consummate legalist. In fact, you would be hardpressed to find another person so zealous for the law. He had firsthand knowledge when he declared, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight” (Rom. 3:20). He had firsthand knowledge when he lamented, “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse” (Gal. 3:10).

Paul also had firsthand experience with grace. So he joyfully declared, “God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” (Gal. 4:4–5). It is impossible to study Paul without coming into contact with grace. So we read in Romans 5 that all our striving comes to an end in Christ. We can only attain peace with God by faith in Christ—the only one who kept the law perfectly.

Legalism in History

As we turn to the pages of church history, we see the church's focus on grace eclipsed by legalism. This happened on a grand scale after the controversy between Augustine and Pelagius. In the aftermath of that controversy, the seeds were sown that would eventually result in a full-blown system of works as the medieval church's view of salvation. A key here is the shift from the biblical teaching on repentance to the church's teaching of penance.

Repentance is illustrated by the tax collector in Christ's parable. The repentant one simply prays to God, "Have mercy; I'm a sinner." Penance is the list of things to do that will put you right with God. By Luther's time, the list had grown rather long. So, Luther vainly tried to reach God by being a good monk. Luther even went into the monastery as a sorely misguided attempt to please God.

Only one thing resulted from Luther's ardent work: he found himself even further away from God and mired in anxiety. Later in life, he even suffered physically from his earlier attempt to attain righteousness by these efforts. But in His grace, God reached down to Luther. We can't grasp grace naturally. That's why grace grasps us.

One branch of the Reformation initially celebrated this glorious truth of grace and then departed from it. In Zurich, there arose the Anabaptists. In addition to their other beliefs, they advocated withdrawing from society and living in segregated communities. They would soon develop a dress code and rules for how they would live and work. They called themselves the Mennonites, as they followed the teachings of Menno Simons (1496–1561). In 1693, Jakob Ammann broke from the Mennonites over the practice of "the ban"—shunning those who transgress rules. His followers would be known as the Amish. They went beyond the gospel to regulations and traditions.

The same dynamic occurred in the twentieth century in various pockets of fundamentalism. I remember walking into a church in the 1970s and being confronted with two large diagrams showing acceptable hair and clothing guidelines for men and for women. Christianity was reduced to lists, mostly of what not to do.

As Christ confronted legalism on nearly every page of the Gospels, you can find legalism throughout the pages of church history. So, too, you can find the opposite. Antinomianism thrived during the Reformation. It also thrived and continues to thrive amid pockets of fundamentalism. Sadly, we can tell the whole story of mankind's misguided quest for God by tracing these ever-present threads of legalism and antinomianism.

Legalism in Life

The opposite of legalism is not license. It is liberty. Luther called Galatians his “Katie.” “I am betrothed to it,” he would say. That is a compliment that goes two ways. It reflects how deeply he loved his wife, and it reflects how deeply he loved the message of Galatians. It is the “Epistle of Liberty.”

In our attempt to uncover the roots of legalism, we must look ultimately at our own lives. Incurvitas keeps us from seeing our true need. It tricks us into thinking we are basically good and only need to be better. Legalism is truly damning and rather damaging. Legalism can even catapult us to its opposite, to a life of license and a life, ultimately, of rebellion.

The reality is that we are not good. How ironic that part of the “good news” of the gospel is that we are not good at all. And because we are not good, we could never look to ourselves but must look to the One born of a woman, born under the law. He is the only righteous One. He kept the law and bore its punishment for those who trust in Him. God pours out His grace freely upon us because of what Christ has done for us. Christ has set us free (Gal. 5:1).