

Issues, Etc.TM

JOURNAL



Legalism & License

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail: The Simplicity of Christ

by Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller

Volume 1, Number 2
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Dear Journal Reader,

Thanks again for subscribing to the *Issues, Etc. Journal*.

In this edition you'll find two articles. In the first, *Legalism & License*, I explore how Legalism and License are really the same error, expressed two different ways. Both are equally dangerous, both rob us the comfort of Christ's Cross, both are cured by a careful handling of God's Word.

The Simplicity of Christ is our "Wittenberg Trail" feature by Pastor Bryan Wolfmueeller. Bryan tells the story of learning to trust the external, objective promises of God in Holy Scripture, after years of liberal Lutheranism and navel-gazing in American Evangelicalism.

Also, check out the new additions to our Find a Church section at the end of the *Journal*.

Enjoy this edition of the *Journal*.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host
Issues, Etc.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in grey ink. The signature appears to read "Todd Wilken" in a cursive, flowing script. The letters are connected, and the overall style is casual and personal.

They seem so different. One person lives his life striving for moral perfection. The other person doesn't try that hard. The first is convinced that he can avoid sinning, if he tries hard enough. The second is equally convinced that he can't avoid sinning, so why try at all? After all, He says, "I like to sin; God likes to forgive; that's a pretty good deal." The first is all about keeping the rules; the second is all about breaking them.



by Todd Wilken

The first is a legalist. The second is licentious. They seem very different, don't they?

Here is a twofold truth, seemingly paradoxical, yet thoroughly Biblical. It's a great way to diagnose yourself, and determine if you are a legalist, or if you are licentious:

*We are never permitted to sin.
We cannot avoid sinning.*

If you're a legalist, you will affirm the first part, but deny the second part. You will say, "We are never permitted to sin. We *can* avoid sinning." If you're licentious, you will affirm the second part and deny the first part. You will say, "We cannot avoid sinning. We *are permitted* to sin."

Now that you know which one you are, consider this: While at first glance they appear to be polar opposites, Legalism and License are really very much alike. Legalism and License have several, very important things in common.

1) Both Legalism and License share a common, false assumption.

Both Legalism and License seem perfectly logical in their respective conclusions. Legalism reasons,

- God forbids me to sin.
- God cannot forbid something I cannot avoid.
- Therefore, I must be able to avoid sinning.

On the other hand, License reasons,

- I cannot avoid sinning.
- God cannot forbid something I cannot avoid.
- Therefore, I must have permission to sin.

Although they come to completely different conclusions, both Legalism and License share the assumption, “God cannot forbid something I cannot avoid.” This assumption isn’t Biblical. God’s commandment doesn’t imply your ability to obey. Your inability to obey doesn’t nullify God’s commandment. St. Paul says that God’s commandments are there to show us our inability to obey, and still hold us accountable for our disobedience:

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:19-20)

2) Both Legalism and License underestimate sin.

Legalism underestimates sin’s depth in the Christian’s life. License underestimates sin’s danger in the Christian’s life.

Legalism stems from a misunderstanding of how pervasive sin is in our lives. The legalist thinks of sin atomistically, that is, he thinks of sin as a set of individual, discrete actions he either does or doesn’t do.

The legalist thinks, "There are thoughts, words and deeds that I do that are sins; and there are thoughts, words and deeds that I do that are sinless." The legalist's goal is to decrease the sinful thoughts, words and deeds in his life, and increase the sinless thoughts, words and deeds in his life.

The legalist thinks that if he could break up his life up into individual seconds, he could identify the seconds when he was sinning, and the seconds when he was sinless.

Of course the Bible doesn't support this view of sin at all. The Ten Commandments in particular, show us that there is nothing we think, say or do that is sinless. Everything we do is stained by sin, even our good works: "All our *righteous* deeds are like a polluted garment." (Isaiah 64:6)

The devil loves it when the legalist strives for sinlessness. It means he's trying to achieve a righteousness of our own that comes through the Law (Galatians 2:16). The Old Adam thrives on the legalist's rule-keeping, it is his lifeblood, it makes him very strong.

License stems from a misunderstanding of how dangerous sin is in our lives. The licentious person views sin as harmless, and without serious consequences or penalty. The devil loves this too. It means that the licentious person no longer fears sin or its penalty. Of course, the licentious person must ignore the constant drumbeat of the Bible, warning of sin and divine judgment. From Genesis to Revelation Scripture warns that sin is dangerous and incurs God's wrath.

The devil also loves it when a licentious person ignores sin's danger and penalty. It means he's ignoring God himself and living in open rebellion



against Him (Psalm 36:1; Romans 3:18). The Old Adam hates God and His commandments.

3) Both Legalism and License prevent the Christian from struggling against his sin.

The legalist thinks that he is struggling against sin successfully, more or less. The licentious person has given up the struggle against sin altogether. Neither the legalist nor the licentious are able to avoid sin or its penalty. This is because neither is really struggling against sin at all.

Isn't *the legalist* at least struggling against sin? No. The legalist *thinks* he is struggling against his sin; but he is only struggling to keep the rules, God's rules, house rules, etc. Struggling to keep the rules isn't the same as struggling against sin.



In fact, the legalist's rule-keeping is no better than the licentious person's rule-breaking. St. Paul says, "through the commandment [sin] might become sinful beyond measure." (Romans 7:7-13; 5:20) The legalist's rule-keeping and the licentious person's rule-breaking only increase sin and its power in their lives.

The Christian struggle against sin is not done by rule-keeping, but by *repentance*.

Some Christians think that to avoid the error of License, it's OK to be a little legalistic. Other Christians think that to avoid the error of Legalism it's OK to practice a little License. Both are wrong.

As you can see, Legalism and License are not two different errors. They are the same error expressed in two different ways. Whether you travel the path of Legalism or of License, you come to the same, inevitable end.

Both the legalist and the licentious, whether they deny sin's depth or sin's danger, ultimately ignore the saving work of Jesus Christ.

The assumption Legalism and License share, "God cannot forbid something I cannot avoid," undermines both Jesus' sinlessness, and his sacrifice for sin. The legalist believes he can avoid sin, and manage (if only occasionally) to live sinlessly. If he is right, then the legalist doesn't need the sinlessness of Jesus, or if he does, he only needs it when he fails to avoid sin. The licentious person believes he has permission to sin. If he is right, then the licentious person doesn't need Jesus to suffer the penalty for his sin.



If Legalism and License are really the same error, is there one answer to both? Yes, first the Law.

The legalist needs to see that he is totally sinful, from top to bottom, from beginning to end. The legalist needs to see himself as total sinner, and say along with St. Paul, "I know that nothing good dwells in me," and, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:18, 24)

The licentious person needs to see his sin for what it is: open rebellion, enmity and insult against God. Though he may take his sin lightly, God does not. The licentious person needs to answer along with St. Paul, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!" and, "Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" (Romans 6:1-2, 15)

The first answer to both Legalism and License is God's Word of Law. The proclamation of the Law leaves the legalist with no place to stand; no thought, word or deed --no second of his life-- that he can call sinless.

Likewise, the Law leaves the licentious person on God's enemies list; an impudent creature, spitting in God's face with every sin. The first answer to both Legalism and License is God's Word of Law that condemns sin completely; but we can't stop there.

What comes next is counterintuitive. Many preachers think that they can cure people of licentiousness by preaching the Law more. This is a good first step, but the Law is only the diagnosis and prognosis. The Law alone isn't the cure for licentiousness. Preachers sometimes think that Legalism can be cured by really driving the Law home to those who think they are keeping it. Again this is a good first step, but the Law alone cannot cure Legalism either. Why are our churches filled with both the legalists and the licentious? Because our pulpits are not filled with both Law and Gospel.

The Law destroys the common, false assumption of both Legalism and License: "God cannot forbid something I cannot avoid." The Law says to the legalist, "You cannot avoid sin." The Law says to the licentious, "There is a penalty for your sin." However, this is all that the Law can do.



Only the Gospel gives both the legalist and the licentious freedom from their error, not by avoiding sin, nor by indulging sin, but by *forgiving* sin. Only the Gospel shows the legalist the sinlessness of Jesus Christ, and the licentious the penalty Jesus paid for sin.

Some pastors are hesitant to preach the Gospel to the legalist and the licentious --especially to the licentious. They reason, "If I proclaim the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ, this legalist will only use that forgiveness to go and start sinning; or this licentious person will only use that forgiveness to go and sin even more."

These pastors understand nothing about Law and Gospel. They mistakenly think that the Gospel needs to be “balanced” or tempered with a dose of the Law, or Christians will become lax about sin or lazy in doing good works. By doing this, pastors only reinforce the error of both the legalist and the licentious.

The Gospel says, “Yes, God always forbids sin, and you can never avoid sin. But the very sin you cannot avoid, Jesus avoided *for you*. The very sin God forbids and condemns, Jesus took to the Cross in his body *for you*.”

Theologians call it the *active* and *passive obedience* of Christ. The Gospel replaces all the legalist’s efforts to be sinless with the sinlessness of Jesus. The Gospel shows the licentious person the true penalty for his sin, taken entirely by Jesus.

The continual proclamation both of Law and Gospel is the only cure for Legalism and License. Not only that, but only the continual proclamation of Law and Gospel engages the Christian in the true struggle against his sin, the very sin that God forbids, the very sin that cannot be avoided.



The licentious person thinks that the struggle against sin is unnecessary. The legalist thinks that the struggle against sin is all about rule-keeping. Both are wrong.

Scripture is clear. God never gives us permission to sin, but we can’t avoid sin. If you can’t avoid sin or its penalty, there is only one thing to do: *repent*. Repentance is the true struggle against sin. Repentance kills the Old Adam. The devil hates it when we repent. It means that we, like St. Paul, are seeking the righteousness of Jesus Christ that comes by faith:

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of

all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (Philippians 3:8-9)

Once the legalist finds his sinlessness in Jesus alone, and once the licentious person finds the penalty for sin paid in Jesus alone, then the struggle against unavoidable sin can really begin. The former legalist will now struggle like he's never struggled before. Because now, he won't be able to take a breather and say, "OK, right now I'm not sinning, if only for this one second." No, there won't be a single second in his life when sin will not be there, close at hand (Romans 7:21). The former licentious person will struggle against sin, perhaps for the first time. Now, he won't be able to sin without hearing the Law's condemnation; he won't be able to ignore sin's penalty.

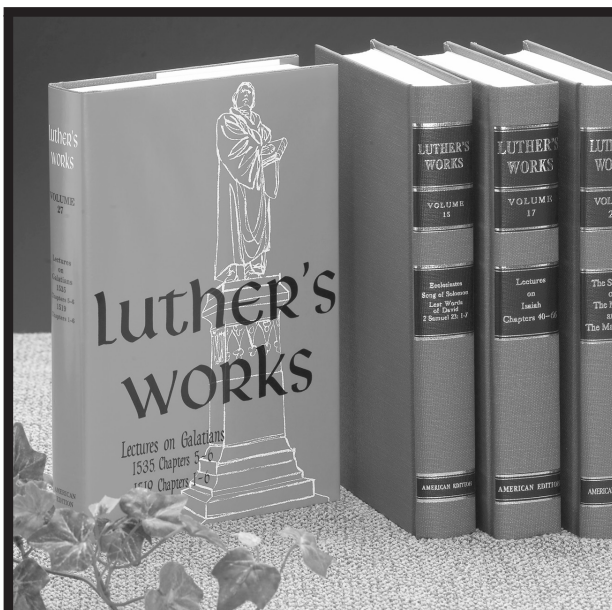
Now, both will struggle against their sin by repentance every second, in every thought, every word and every deed. Under the proclamation of Law and Gospel, their lives will become lives of constant repentance and faith in Jesus' all-sufficient sinlessness and sacrifice.

You may have noticed as you began reading that it was difficult to diagnose yourself as *either* a legalist *or* as licentious. That is because we are all both. We go back and forth between the two every day. We think we can avoid sin sometimes, we give ourselves permission to sin at other times. But God's Word will not permit our Legalism or our License.

God's Word puts us in the impossible position of struggling against our sin, the very sin that God forbids, the very sin that we cannot avoid. This position is impossible for us, but not for Jesus Christ. Jesus has taken our sin, the very sin that God forbids, the very sin that we cannot avoid. So, whether you're a legalist or licentious, repent and trust Him.



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Wittenberg Trail

The Simplicity of Christ

by Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller

I was baptized in the American Lutheran Church, confirmed in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. My family was active in the church, in worship and in the youth group, but by age 16 I had never seen a Small Catechism. I did, at age 16, have a youth leader who was a Charismatic Evangelical, a pietist on pilgrimage in a liberal congregation.

I liked to study the Bible, so I and a few other youth were identified by our youth leaders as “real Christians.” In an attempt to “grow our faith,” he would take us every Sunday evening to the local Calvary Chapel where the people “took the Bible seriously.” There I learned that the Bible was about obedience, about a “life sold out to Christ,” that “Christianity is a relationship, not a religion.” On these Sunday nights we “dedicated our whole lives to Christ,” we learned to give serious attention to the internal aspects of a “relationship with Jesus.” We were taught to cast away the “external trappings of religion” and “empty ritual.” It was in this non-denominational church that I learned to demonstrate my faith by my works, by my obedience, by my devotional maintenance. I learned to gauge my nearness to God by my feelings. I called it a “faith-life,” my “walk with the Lord.”

Among the external trappings that I cast away were the gift of Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the liturgy. I began to reason like this: “It’s just a symbol anyhow, and I can demonstrate my faith better through obedience than through this ritual,” or “How can bread and wine ever

empower me like being filled with the Spirit?" or "All this rote repetition quenches the moving of the Holy Spirit, you have got to mean it." My faith was growing, I was figuring it out, or so I thought.



So there I was, a young man with my feet in two churches. I was convinced the Lutherans were not Christians; that they were spiritually lazy to the point of spiritual death, and I saw myself as a missionary to these Lutherans and continued to attend services and teach the youth. On the other side, my own faith was becoming exhausting. One day would be fantastic, with all my spiritual disciplines in check to the point that I saw myself as a super-Christian. Then the next day I would realize my sin, and all my pride would unravel and I would wonder if there was a place for me in life eternal.

When I reflect back on those days, there is one prevailing thought: *What must I do (or not do) to please God and make Him happy?* And this making God happy was difficult work. Certainty of salvation was difficult to achieve and came only in sporadic and unpredictable waves. Such is life on the emotion-Drn searching-for-the-certainty-of-salvation-through-works roller coaster called pietism, and it is a weary life, a swing back and forth between pride and despair.

But the Lord is merciful. I met my future bride Keri in college. She had a similar story. Her family grew up in the liberal Presbyterian Church USA, but we met at a college Bible Study at the local Southern Baptist church. We were both disgusted with the liberal rejection of the Bible of the churches of our youth, and we both had a growing dissatisfaction with the emotional insanity and theological muddiness of the Evangelical churches. We began to ask questions that couldn't be answered.

"If salvation is not by works, why is all we hear about in the teaching the works I'm supposed to do?"

"If the Bible is to be interpreted literally, why do you say the bread in the Lord's Supper is a symbol? After all, didn't Jesus say, 'This is My body'?"

"If baptism is my work of obedience, why does Peter say 'baptism now saves you' (1 Peter 3:21)?"

"If the unbeliever is 'dead in their trespasses and sins' (Ephesians 2:1), why does the preacher keep asking them to make a decision for Christ?"



It seemed like the Bible teachers we listened to were always pointing us inside to our own works and feelings, but the Bible was always pointing us outside, to these things that God was doing, His Word, His promises, His gift of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. There is a certainty, an objectivity in these things.

We began to know the comfort of God's promises; "It doesn't matter what I feel, God's promises are true." But where was a church that taught such things? The Evangelicals kept driving us down into the path of emotional despair, but the whacked-out liberal churches had jettisoned the Scriptures to stay afloat in the choppy seas of tolerance. We were looking for a church that trusted the Lord's Word and clung to the "simplicity of Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3), but this was a difficult search.

We went on a 16 month church *tour-de-force*. We visited the Roman Catholics, Methodists, Charismatics, Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox; you name it, we saw it. We found ourselves enrolled in an adult instruction class at the local Missouri Synod Lutheran congregation. There the Scriptures were brought forth in their simplicity, and clung to with a simple faith. There was

no hedging, no explaining away, no rationalizing, no watering down, just the Scriptures. And there, in the center of the Bible was Jesus, crucified, dead, buried, risen and ascended for me.



I still remember learning the distinction between Law and Gospel. It was as if the lights were coming on and illuminating each page of the Bible. Paul became clear, as did the parables of Jesus, the preaching of Peter, the sermons of the prophets and the books of Moses. With this clarity came the comfort of the Gospel, that God wanted to save me, and He did everything to accomplish my salvation, and then came to me with His forgiveness and gifts and promises so that I would be absolutely certain of my salvation. How wonderful!

Now, we did not join the Lutheran church right away. There were a number of theological obstacles to overcome. I almost fell over the first time I heard that these Lutherans didn't believe in the pre-tribulation rapture of the church. The fact that the pastor stood in front of the congregation and forgave sins was confusing. The practice of closed communion was troubling and very difficult to understand. And for months the liturgy seemed stiff and strange to our ears.

But all of these questions were small compared to the question that *had been* answered, "Does God love me, even me?" The answer that is brought forth over and over in the Scriptures is "Yes!" He loves us enough to send Jesus to a bloody death in my place, for me. He loves me enough to pour out His wrath on another, on His beloved Son. He loves me enough to baptize me and forgive me and call me His own dear child. He loves me so much that He doesn't leave my salvation up to me, but comes to me and

calls and rescues and delivers me from sin and death. Yes, God loves me. No matter how close I feel to Him, no matter how much I prayed, no matter how much good I've done or failed to do, no matter what, His cross and His word of promise stand sure for me.

This is what I heard in the Lutheran church, in the pulpit, in Bible class, in the conversations with friends in the congregation: the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd speaking simply His love to His dear little lamb. Christianity is not about the things that I have done for Jesus, but what He has done for me, that's where we find true and eternal comfort.



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May you have eternal comfort in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus this Christmas season.

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Todd Wilken, Host
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