

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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9/28/2025

**Sermon Title:** The Legalistic and Antinomian Spirit

**Sermon Text:** Romans 3:31 (reading v. 28-31)

**Rom. 3:28** For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

**Rom. 3:29** Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also,

**Rom. 3:30** since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

**Rom. 3:31** Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

**Main Point:** Legalism is more than simply believing that we can earn God's favor, and Antinomianism is more than simply believing that we can live however we want. Both are rooted in a common twisting of the grace and law of God.

## Outline:

1. The Legalistic and Antinomian Spirit of Eve
2. The Gospel Remedy

## Introduction

“He’s a legalist. I heard he never goes out to eat on Sundays.”

“I’ve never heard her swear. I think she’s legalistic.”

“They insist on sending their kids to a Christian school or homeschooling. I think that seems legalistic.”

“Even when he travels out of town he insists on finding a church to worship at on Sundays. I think that’s legalism.”

Have you ever heard anything like this before? Or have you ever *said* anything like this before? I suspect you may have. And if you haven’t said it you may have at least thought it.

Legalism is a term Christians are familiar with. We generally use it in normal conversation to describe someone who refrains from things that we might think are just fine. Or maybe just someone who we think needs to lighten up a little. That’s how Christians generally use it in conversation.

But if you gave many Christians who have been around the church for a while a theology exam, they’d probably get more precise. I think most Christians would theologically say legalism is “trying to earn your salvation through your own works.”

The question is, we seem to instinctively know that legalism is bad (no matter how you use it in conversation), but what reason does Scripture give us for rejecting legalism?

One pretty common approach is that we’ll hear some say that because the opposite of legalism is antinomianism, what we need when legalism creeps in is just a bit more of an antinomian attitude.

What is antinomianism? Antinomianism at its core is “anti-law.” It may be a doctrinal belief or even feeling that God’s law doesn’t matter, or that we can live life however we want. But it’s this general idea that because of grace, we as Christians aren’t meant to care about the law anymore. Like that’s over with now.

Why would someone think that this attitude is a good antidote to legalism? Well you can see the logic, I suspect: “We just need to be willing (because of what Christ has done for us) to stop being hung up on pleasing God. Jesus kept the law, so now we have no such obligation on us.” The argument is, if you have a person who is obsessed with his own works and deeds, and who keeps counting all of his obedience on both hands and trying to find peace that way, what he really needs is to see that he’s not bound by the law at all. To misuse something from Paul in

Galatians, this person might say “We’re not under law, but under grace.” And grace is great, this person might say, because it’s the opposite of law.

And many Christians – maybe even most of them – think that we just need to strike the balance between these errors. And they think of it sort of like a seesaw where if you just have a little more legalism you’d stop being so antinomian, or if you were just a little more antinomian then you’d be less legalistic. And it’s easy to look at the Christian life as this sort of wavering between caring about obeying God’s law, and making sure you don’t care about obeying God’s law. As if you’re supposed to do both somehow.

But what I hope to show you is this: the Christian life is *not* meant to be a balancing act between antinomianism and legalism.

The Christian life is meant to be lived in union with Christ. And Christ is the remedy for both legalism and antinomianism.

Today I want to talk about legalism, what it is, and I want you to also see that legalism and it’s supposed opposite (antinomianism) both grow out of the same rotten root, and so we must reject both.

And if we can really understand what it is and where it comes from, then I’m also hopeful that we can then respond to both with the same gospel remedy.

## **1. The Legalistic and Antinomian Spirit of Eve**

First, we’ll be helped by considering the legalistic and antinomian spirit of Eve.

I think that starting with the Garden of Eden may help us to think carefully about this, because both legalism and lawlessness actually grow out of the same common root, which begins in the garden.

You see, we tend to think that lawlessness and legalism are opposites, but they are actually nonidentical maternal twins.

Look here. Eve is in the garden, has every need provided for, and yet God does place the tree of the knowledge of good and evil there. It’s as though God is saying to her,

“you have everything that you need. But you have to trust my goodness and wisdom when I say, do not eat from *that* tree. If you will do that, you will not only give me glory and prove me trustworthy, but you will have more joy than you ever thought possible: you will have a life provided for and a creator whom you trust.”

So obeying by staying away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil become an opportunity for Eve (and Adam) to trust and to more deeply enjoy God.

But the serpent counters God by suggesting that

(1) God is lying. You won't die,

(2) God is fundamentally greedy and petty. He's trying to keep you from becoming like him because he is fundamentally greedy and not generous. He tells her, God knows you'll be like him if you do it. Right? God is holding back from you. He's not actually gracious or generous at all.

He is fundamentally attacking not just God's law, but his character. The tree is an opportunity to trust and obey. Satan makes it an opportunity to distrust and rebel.

And so here is what I want you to see as we think about these events in Genesis 3: the legalistic spirit took hold of Eve's heart before she touched the fruit.

Eve saw only restriction in the garden. She saw the law of God as something intended to hold her back and keep blessings from her. Now, what happened? She rejected the law. She chose not to obey it. Another way of putting this is, out of her legalistic perspective, she chose to escape what she perceived to be God's harshness by becoming lawless. She rejected God's law.

Listen: this is key—At its core, both legalism and lawlessness believe the same lie: “God, you never give me anything. You insist on me earning everything that I am ever going to have.”

At rock bottom, that is a shared belief between the legalist and antinomian. This is the mother of all lies that both of them are born from.

This is what I want you to see: these two errors both begin as a distortion of God's character, a mistrust of him, and a losing sight of his love and grace. Legalism says God is harsh and cruel and selfish, and he has to be appeased by running into the

law and following its rules. Antinomianism accepts the premise that God is cruel, strict, and selfish, but the antinomian is different in the sense that he believes that the only real freedom is found in escaping from God's law, which the legalist also wants, but he tries to escape from the law a different maneuver. The legalist tries to escape by running towards it; the antinomian tries to escape by running from it. But both are trying to escape the law.

Do you remember the parable of the talents? The last worker said to his master, "I was afraid of you, for you are a severe man." This is the core distortion at the heart of both errors we're talking about. Seeing God as severe rather than gracious.

What might legalism and antinomianism look like in practice? Here's an example: the person who wants to know "how much sin can I commit before I am not saved anymore?" This is someone who is demonstrating both a legalistic and an antinomian spirit, because they see God as a "harsh master" who may love me, but only because of a legal loophole or some obligation that he is under. ("I am justified, so you have to accept me.") This person believes that God's primary goal is restriction and constriction of the heart of his people.

And the same person thinks he is helping himself by saying, "But I don't have to keep the law now, because I got you on a technicality: the death of your son for sinners. And now your horrible law can't hurt me anymore and you have to let me be your friend."

Sinclair Ferguson defines legalism as

"any teaching that diminishes or distorts the generous love of God and the full freeness of his grace. It then distorts God's graciousness revealed in his law and fails to see law set within its proper context in redemptive history as an expression of a gracious Father. This is the nature of legalism" (The Whole Christ, Ch. 4).

What have we been saying? Both of these problems begin as a distortion of God's character. Both view God as a magnified policeman whose law exists to deprive and hold us back. They only differ on how we can escape from his divine grasp: one says we can escape by being incredibly well-behaved citizens. The other says

we can escape by getting our ticket punched properly. Both assume that we do need to escape his divine grasp.

This is why antinomianism cannot cure legalism. God tells us that fundamentally the essence of life is “glorifying and enjoying God forever.” But these two evil twins both believe that life lived in our own power, wiggling out from under the Sovereign one will give us peace. Both legalism and antinomianism are fundamentally about escaping God, not in being brought to him.

You might say, “well the problem isn’t with God. It’s with his law. It’s his law that we want to escape from.” And that’s actually the next error involved here. What happens is, in legalism instead of seeing God’s good and holy character reflected in the law, we treat the law like it’s something external to God, something that doesn’t teach us about him. Geerhardus Vos puts it this way:

“Legalism is a peculiar kind of submission to God’s law, something that no longer feels the personal divine touch in the rule it submits to.”

We’re on the road to legalism when we don’t see God’s law as good. We see it as bad.

Paul has nothing kind to say about the ability of the law to justify sinners, but our *sin* is the problem with the law. The law is not the problem. It was built to teach us what holiness and goodness look like, but the law wasn’t built to save. It was built to expose and bless, but not forgive.

The Bible continuously insists that God’s law is good, and it is good because of whose law it is.

Look at how the law is closely connected with God’s character in Scripture: Psalm 19 says,

“The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart... the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.”

We need to see that the Psalmist takes these things that are true of God and says, “that’s also what God’s *law* is like. It reflects his righteousness, his perfection, his wisdom, his holiness.”

When God gives the ten commandments to Israel, do you remember what he did? He starts by saying, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” He introduces his law by first introducing himself and his gracious saving character. He’s telling them, the commandments you’re about to read do not come from a cruel despot who is opposed to you or your happiness. Instead, this law comes from the heart of a saving and gracious God.

In Leviticus God tells Israel what it looks like to be holy, and then he says, “Be holy, for I am holy.” What does it look like to be holy like God? It looks like keeping the law that he’s giving them.

The legalistic and antinomian spirit both take the law of God and the character of God and pull them apart. It might say something like, “God is so kind that he’ll do whatever it takes to help us escape from this restrictive, burdensome, miserable law.” Here’s Sinclair Ferguson again. “At its root antinomianism separates God’s law from God’s person, and grace from the union with Christ in which the law is written in the heart.”

So I hope you see this now: Telling someone that lawlessness is the cure for legalism is like having a friend who is poisoned and saying, “Hey. This guy needs more of that poison.” Or a person who was drowning where you say, “Let’s get this guy some more water.”

I may be laying this on a little thick, but hopefully this helps you see that antinomianism and legalism aren’t cures for each other. They don’t balance each other out. They aren’t water and fire. They’re both fire.

They are two kids sitting on the same side of the seesaw, both of them saying, “God’s law is not your friend. It has no grace in it. There is no mercy in God.” Each of them has a different plan for escaping from God – this cruel taskmaster. And if you listen to either of them, you will not understand the gospel. They are both lying. They are both offering the same poison, and there is no cure or real escape if you go with them.

Neither antinomianism or legalism will help us in the Christian life.

## **2. The Gospel Remedy**

Now, here is where these things fit into this series on Romans, and it's our second point today, which is the gospel remedy.

Paul has been arguing that we are justified by faith apart from works of the law. We saw this in verse 28. Then in verse 31, Paul asks this important question: "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?" Here's the question: are the law and faith in conflict when rightly understood and rightly used? Paul is emphatic. He doesn't just say, "No!" He says, "It's the opposite. In the gospel, 'we uphold the law.'"

To understand the faith that saves, and the Savior who saves, we have to appreciate the gospel Paul is preaching. At this point now, what I'm talking about is not a fundamentally doctrinal belief. I'm really talking about a feeling that many of us have. Let me see if I can make sense of this for you:

When we talk about legalism, most people think – and most preachers preach like legalism is the belief that my works contribute to my salvation. But can I tell you a secret? I have never once had anyone I counseled tell me,

"Pastor, I think that I'm a legalist, because I keep slipping into believing that my works give me peace with God or contribute to my justification."

Here is what *does* happen in practice, though: in our heads we think we've got the gospel straight, we believe in Jesus, but we also continue to think that God is still like a divine policeman who is watching closely so he can bring the legal hammer down on us and punish us for our sins, or that he is a divine policeman who has decided because of a legal loophole to let us get away with our lawbreaking ("Oh, I see you have your get out of jail free card. Go along then.")

So in our heads, we can have this part straight. ("My works don't contribute to my justification in God's sight.") We'd pass the theology exam, right? But how do we move past the ideas and theoretical knowledge into living in real gospel freedom like God gives us in Scripture? The answer provided by Paul is not by rejecting the law; it's found "in Christ."

Let me briefly mention three remedies to legalism and antinomianism that God provides in the gospel:

(1) The first remedy is probably the most fundamental to start with, and it is this: to know on what basis I have peace with God (the doctrinal angle). We are justified by faith in Christ, apart from works. We are accepted only in the beloved, and not in ourselves. We contribute nothing to our being accepted. This is the first remedy to legalism and lawlessness: to know on what basis we are justified.

(2) The second remedy is bigger than doctrine and deals more with our own deep heart experience—you might even say our feelings, and that is this: to believe deep in our heart that we are united to Christ, who is good and holy. To embrace the union with God that we enjoy through Christ. So the second remedy Scripture gives is union with Christ.

(3) The third remedy that Paul gives us in Romans is to see the law as a reflection of the character of God, and not as something that is outside of him or external to him. To be able to pray with the Psalmist, “The law of the Lord is pure... I love your law...” The third remedy, then, is to understand the law as good, because God is good.

Legalism and Antinomianism both fail to see the law and the gospel as expressions of God’s character and grace. This is why Paul can say “we uphold the law” here in Romans 3:31. Fundamentally because he is in Christ, the Christian is in harmony with God’s law, not as a means of being justified, but as an embodiment of what it means to live in union with Him. The Christian is in harmony with God’s law because he is united with Christ, who kept the law perfectly.

And you see, the gospel Paul is preaching sees law as an expression of grace that we can only enjoy if we have embraced Christ fully and are found “in him.” In Christ, we now see that the law is not a curse or a misery, but a blessing and a means (when properly seen) to enjoying God more and more.

Why do you think that so many people who aren’t born again hear the gospel and think that they are being called upon to be better people? The basic human default is legalism. Every world religion on planet earth besides Christianity testifies to this.

On the other hand, others hear the doctrine of justification but not Jesus. This person can hear the same message and think the gospel means they can go on living as they want to. An unregenerate person may hear the gospel as a message about how to escape from a God he already doesn't like, but not a message about having Christ or being united to him. That's antinomianism.

When I was in High School I had an otherwise irreligious classmate once tell me that he didn't have to become a Christian. I asked why, and he said, "Christians have been telling me for years that Christ died for my sins. I believe them. That's why I'm not worried about God judging me. If Jesus died for my sins, I can't go to hell." In his case, people had told him, "Jesus died for your sins," but never told him how he could receive that forgiveness of Christ. He heard a sloppy version of the doctrine, but he did not hear it as the call of Christ. He wasn't even a Christian and his heart attitude was lawless, right? He didn't want to obey God, because he didn't even want God at all. But he really had a legalistic attitude underneath that saw God's law as constricting, and saw his need to get out from under it. The gospel (for him) was a means of escape, not a means of coming to God.

So an unregenerate person may hear "Jesus saves," but what they hear is not a saving message. They hear Jesus as one who perhaps punches our ticket so we can get away with sin, or they hear him as the one who won't let us live life the way we want.

Sinclair gets at the deeper problem:

"...Underneath lies a failure to understand grace and ultimately to understand God. True, his love for me is not based on my qualification or my preparation. But it is misleading to say that God accepts us the way we are. Rather he accepts us despite the way we are. He receives us only in Christ and for Christ's sake. Nor does he mean to leave us the way he found us, but to transform us into the likeness of his Son. Without that transformation and new conformity of life we do not have any evidence that we were ever his in the first place."

Listen as Ferguson continues:

“Legalism can, therefore, be banished only when we see that the real ‘truth about God’ is that when we glorify him we also come to ‘enjoy him forever,’ and with him enjoy everything he has given us.”

Ferguson is saying (and I think Paul is saying here in Romans) that when we cease to see God as fundamentally restrictive and instead as fundamentally gracious and generous, we will run into his arms and escape from the strong grip of both of these errors.

When we see that Christ makes the law a blessing that will enhance our happiness, and our attitude toward the law changes, then we will feel no need to escape from the law when we are in Christ, who kept and fulfilled the law for us already.

Paul says, we don’t overthrow the law. “On the contrary, we uphold the law.” The tension of life is harmonized in Christ.

The non-Christian does not (and cannot) have the same attitude toward the law. Because apart from Jesus, the law just looks like a rulebook of how God is going to get us. Because Christ hasn’t dealt with their guilt and sin, the non-Christian only finds himself thinking, “This sounds terrible.” And he either tries to keep the rulebook (which will never bring him peace) or deny the rulebook altogether.

And by the way, if you are not a Christian, or if you realize as I say these things that this is you, I want you to hear very clearly that until you are in Christ, you do have to answer for your sin. And I want you to know, the weight of that judgment is something you cannot bear. Jesus Christ saves sinners. You only need to come to him in repentance, looking to him in his life and death and resurrection as your only source of hope. If you do that, it will not only transform your life, it will transform your attitude toward God’s holy demands.

How can this good news of Jesus transform the way you see the law? Well look at this:

Paul always insists on the goodness of the law, and yet absolutely hates legalism. How can that be? Isn’t it one or the other? Paul is modeling for us a properly Christian attitude toward the law. “The law is not going to justify me, but it shows me what God is like. It shows me my need of Christ, and it also shows me what a

life of obedience looks like when I am united to God in Christ. This law corrects me, directs me, and comforts me. It's a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. In Christ, I find the law to contain joy and purity and wisdom and holiness and goodness in becoming more and more like what God's law shows me."

When we see or think about the law, if we have Paul's attitude we see the law and think, "This is the character of the God who loves me. This is his holiness on display. This is what he is like," and so first fundamentally we love the law because we have had a change of heart and we love God. But then beyond that, we want to be like the one we love... in other words, we start to yearn to be holy because we know it means nearness and intimacy with him, and that in Christ the consequences of our failure have been taken away so that we can follow him without fear.

And so the gospel gives us a love-motivation to obey, not a fear-motivation. And not a "I must repay; look what I owe" motivation (except perhaps as a response of love for what has been done, but never to repay). So a right-facing Gospel-oriented view of the law and grace has a way of deepening our own holiness and gospel obedience.

## **Conclusion**

Let me conclude with a preview of what's coming: As we keep reading through Romans, I want you to notice several things:

The first is this: Paul constantly and incessantly insists that the gospel is completely incompatible with lawlessness, and he spends whole chapters showing why. One of the worst slanders Paul can imagine with regard to the gospel is the idea that it leads to an embrace of sinful living. As though to embrace Christ is to embrace sin. Never!

Second, I want you to notice that Paul never denigrates the law. He only ever rejects it as a means of justification. "Don't make it do what it wasn't made to do," you might see Paul saying. He loves the law, but not for the justification of sinners.

Third, I want you to notice the consistent emphasis on union with Christ throughout this letter. We are justified by Christ, but we are not united to

justification. We are sanctified in Christ, but we are not united to sanctification. It is *in Christ* we find all of these gifts. But we weren't made to pursue gifts – we were made to pursue Christ.

So today, as we conclude: the gospel says, “look to Jesus, not yourself. Look to Christ, not what you've done. But never so that you can escape from God or his word or his law.” But rather because here we find the very thing we were made for: in the gospel we can finally glorify God and enjoy him forever.

*Let's pray.*

*Lord, would you give us a fundamental love and appreciation of who you are? Would you give us a love and appreciation of your law, but also a love and appreciation of the grace that you shower us with on a daily basis? Help your people today, that we would see your mercy, grace, and kindness in Christ, that we would know the peace that only comes through the work of Christ alone. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*