

The Perfect Law of Liberty **James 1:23-27 (NKJV)**

23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

Paul in several of his gospels puts much emphasis on God's grace and does not emphasize the keeping of the law except to tell us that no one does or can keep it completely.

James put a lot of emphasis on keeping the law and thus some have supposed that they are contrary to one another.

No less than Martin Luther had great difficulty with this problem and call James an epistle of straw, speaking of its little value in the Christian church.

As a result James is not one of the favorite passages for Christians today.

But there is not a contradiction between James and Paul.

Also today we hear a lot about legalism and how conservatives are criticized for teaching that Christians are to live in narrowly defined ways.

But legalism is not so much requiring Christians to live by a narrow standard so much as it is why is it required.

Salvation is by grace offered freely, without works, in Jesus Christ through faith.

Any time that works are added to that, it is legalism.

Any time it is taught that God loves those who perform better than others who perform less that is legalism.

Legalism is not what you do but why you do it.

For those reading the outline, look at the end of the message for support from respected authors.

There are blessings ascribed to those who keep the law, one of the most significant is Joshua.

Joshua 1:8 (NKJV)

8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

So then keeping the law and teaching others to do so is not legalism.

Matthew 5:17-19 (NKJV)

17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. 18 For 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. 19 Whoever 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.

I know that Paul said that:

Romans 10:4 (NKJV)

4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

But he did not say that Christ is the end of the law but that Christ was the end of the law FOR righteousness for the believer.

Our righteousness come from Jesus Christ not through works.

Titus 3:5 (NKJV)

5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit,

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NKJV)

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.

To say that there is no law for the Christian is an old heresy called antinomianism (without law).

I have never found anyone who thinks that it would be OK for other people, any other people to steal from them or to take their life or to lie about them or to sleep with their wife, etc.

So everyone believes in keeping some laws.

But why do we keep them that is the question that determines if it is legalism or not.

I. Law

A. Law is fairly easy to define.

1. It is the revealed will of God on a matter of human life.
2. God gave Adam a command to not eat of the tree.
3. God gave Abraham a command to leave his family and to go where God told him to.
4. God gave Moses the 10 commandments.
5. God also gave Israel many commandments concerning the worship system that they were to follow.

6. There were numerous other commands that God gave to individuals that were primarily for them.
- B. There are said to be 613 laws in the Old Testament.
1. But the Jews had turn them into thousands
 2. “All kinds of things were classified as work. For instance, to carry a burden on the Sabbath Day is to work. But next a burden has to be defined. So the Scribal Law lays it down that a burden is "food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put upon a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member, water enough to moisten an eye-salve, paper enough to write a customs house notice upon, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to make a pen"—and so on endlessly. So they spent endless hours arguing whether a man could or could not lift a lamp from one place to another on the Sabbath, whether a tailor committed a sin if he went out with a needle in his robe, whether a woman might wear a broach or false hair, even if a man might go out on the Sabbath with artificial teeth or an artificial limb, if a man might lift his child on the Sabbath Day. These things to them were the essence of religion. Their religion was a legalism of petty rules and regulations.” *William Barclay, Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "The Eternal Law (Matt 5:17-20)"*.
 3. It is kind of like the notes or even the references in your study Bible, they are not part of the Bible given by God but men’s insights concerning God’s Word.

II. Perfect Law

- A. Why does James refer to the perfect law.
1. Psalm 19:7-9 (NKJV)
 - a. 7 The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; 8 The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; 9 The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
 2. Because it is perfect.
 - a. It comes from a perfect God.
 - b. It reflects God’s perfect nature.
 3. It is the perfect tool to bring conviction of sin.

4. It is what the Holy Spirit uses to show us the need of a Savior.

III. Law of Liberty

- A. It is the law of liberty in that it sets us free from the hold sin has in our life.
 1. John 8:34-36 (NKJV)
 - a. 34 Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. 35 And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. 36 Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.
 2. John 8:31-32 (NKJV)
 - a. 31 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. 32 And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."
- B. The full reference to the perfect law of liberty is to the gospel because it gives us liberty.
 1. Paul's whole theology of law and grace is contained within this concept of law as liberty. The 'law of liberty' is the gospel. *Gordon Keddie, Welwyn Commentary Series – The Practical Christian: James simply explained, (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 1989), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 77.*
 2. The effective difference between the Mosaic law and the Christian "law of liberty" is not really in character and content: for example, both condemn, among other things, adultery, stealing, murder and perjury, and each is a law of love, for example, in charity of word and deed. *James B. Adamson, The New International Commentary on the New Testament – The Epistle of James, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 32.*
- C. It is the law of liberty because we freely obey it.
 1. Christ established a new law for right living that called for even holier habits than the old laws of Moses. The difference now is that the men respond to this new law because they want to, not because they are told to. *J.D. Douglas and Philip W. Comfort, ed., New Commentary on the Whole Bible – New Testament: Based on the Classic Commentary of Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1990), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 01".*
 2. In this sense we are free from the law, because we are under grace (Romans 6:14). And yet, in another sense, we embrace the actual keeping of the law as a freedom we can now enjoy, not because it can earn salvation for us, but because in Christ it can be the practical rule for a free

life of holy and willing discipleship to him! *Gordon Keddie, Welwyn Commentary Series – The Practical Christian: James simply explained, (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 1989), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 77.*

What is legalism? It is a wrong attitude toward the code of laws under which a person lives. Legalism involves the presence of law, the wrong motive toward obeying that law, and often the wrong use of the power provided to keep the law, but it is basically a wrong attitude. Thus legalism may be defined as "a fleshly attitude which conforms to a code for the purpose of exalting self." The code is whatever objective standard is applicable to man at a particular time (today it is the law of Christ); the motive is to exalt self and gain merit rather than to glorify God because of what He has done; and the power used to obey the code is that of the flesh, not that of the Holy Spirit. It is very important to note that a legalist keeps the law; he is not a violator of the law. Not to obey the law of Christ is lawlessness, not liberty. To obey it to exalt self is legalism. The legalist and the nonlegalist will both give at least outward conformity to the law under which they are living. *Charles C. Ryrie, Balancing the Christian Life, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 167.*

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that having to do something is not legalism, but the wrong attitude toward doing it is. In the example above both Israelites had to bring sacrifices; otherwise they would have suffered certain penalties. Their attitude toward what they had to do determined their legalism or absence of it. Or to use a nonbiblical illustration, a serious athlete has to keep training rules. Most athletes are glad to keep them, rigid as they may be, for the sheer love of sports. A few conform in order to make the team and glorify or show off themselves. The right attitude is love of sports; the wrong show-off attitude is legalism. But both attitudes relate to the same code of rules, and both produce conformity. *Charles C. Ryrie, Balancing the Christian Life, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 168.*

“First, **legalism results in an emphasis on works.** The council recognized that any addition to grace, regardless of how small or seemingly insignificant, not only pollutes the gospel but also opens the door to the same kind of legalism that characterized the Pharisees in the temple. We see this today in denominations that insist, “Unless you are baptized, you cannot be saved” (cf. 15:1). This one slight stipulation in addition to simple belief leads to an obsessive focus on external behavior, such that the entire body becomes defined by its dos and don’ts.

A focus on the Law invariably leads to guilt. Once guilt has accomplished its purpose in driving the individual to repentance of sin and faith in Christ, it has served its purpose. At that point, another dynamic takes over. The Holy Spirit begins a process of transformation. Whereas legalism thrives on guilt and creates fear and hopelessness in the individual, grace thrives on love, which drives out fear and inspires hope—a confident expectation of future victory over sin and death.” *Charles R Swindoll, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary – Acts, (Nashville, Tennessee: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 307.*