

The Abomination of Regulation

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As long as there has been 7th Day Adventists, I believe that in the main they have been labelled as legalists, for they hold to the truth that the law of God is binding on man and the rule of life, and that God's law is to be kept and obeyed. It is the manner by which the believers obey God's law that causes he or she to be rightfully labelled as legalists whether they be a 7th Day Adventist or otherwise.

Jesus said, "If you love me Keep my commandments." John 14:15

"For this is love that we keep His commandments" 1 John 5:3

"This is love that we walk after His commandments." 2 John:6

"If thou will enter into life, keep the commandments." Matthew 19:17

Christ also said in John 12:48, "He that rejecteth me and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him."

The Father's commandment was that men would believe in Christ whom He sent into the world, only thus could they be saved. Having considered for a moment on these texts I have quoted from God's word, there are some of God's people who believe that if you keep the commandments you will have life, for it is written, "If you will enter into life, keep the commandments."

But what of the text that says,

Ephesians 2:8, 9

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: .9 Not of works, lest any man should boast."

To some, there appears to be a conflict here. On the one hand it is written, "keep the commandments if you will enter into life" and on the other hand it is written we are saved and have life through faith, by God's grace, not of works. To many of God's people, they find a conflict here in their lives. There are some whose main thrust in their Christian walk is one of works, commandment keeping – and the salvation God offers by His grace through faith – is placed as a poor second in the Christian experience. Then there is another group whose main thrust in their Christian walk is one of salvation and life through faith and by God's grace and the law of God takes a poor second place in their Christian experience. What is the truth of the matter? Man is saved by faith, not by works, but man's faith will be shown by His works, and these works to be evidenced by obedience to God's law and motivated by love and by Christ living within.

Not by works motivated by a seemingly mandatory instruction from God that says, "Keep my commandments." God is saying that if you love me, you will keep my commandments. It will become a natural response, because Christ lives within.

Colossians 1:27

"Christ in you the hope of glory."

Any other way is a legalistic endeavour to earn salvation by adherence to a set of rules and laws. Good works in whatever form, whether they be of man or whether they be of God's spirit within have no merit for salvation as good as these works may be. (Repeat).

Nor friends do the true works of faith, motivated by Christ living within have any trace of self-centredness. (The servant of the Lord, Sister White, placed the matter of legalism in its true perspective when speaking of Christ meeting with Nicodemus. She commented in:

Desire of Ages p 172

"He who is trying to reach heaven by his own works in keeping the law is attempting an impossibility. There is no safety for one who has merely a legal religion, a form of godliness."

The works of self are legalistic. The works of faith done under the power of God are not. And yet man's destiny will be determined by his obedience to the whole law.

Desire of Ages, p 498

"Supreme love to God and impartial love to man are the principles to be wrought out in the life. "

Does there still appear to be a conflict between salvation by faith alone on one hand, and the keeping of the law on the other? Never! God has enunciated the principle of true obedience. He did so in the Old Testament where it is written in the book of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 36:26

"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them."

What a wonderful promise and it is the work of grace that provides both the cleansing and the power to live in obedience to God. Under these conditions it is seen that there is not one trace or iota of legalism in God's condition of obedience. No self-righteousness. It is a love response motivated by Christ living within the believer. The Pharisees were a prime example of this legalistic condition and way of living; unloving, unforgiving, harsh and self-centred, living by a set of laws and regulations and the manipulation of the commandments of God and the plan of salvation. Jesus had many words of condemnation for them. Calling them "whited sepulchres." Matt 23:27.

What is legalism? Jesus portrays it as role-laying – pretending to be completely holy, whilst in actual fact, the inner man (or woman) is defiled and spiritually dead. Like tomb nicely white-washed on the outside, but full of dead men's bones inside -lifeless.

Apart from being condemned as legalists, the Pharisees also perverted God's laws "teaching for doctrine the commandments of men i.e. Traditions."

Matthew 15:9

"But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."

Jesus exclaims that the worship of legalists is in vain and worthless!

Cast your mind back to the life of Cain. Did not Cain bring an offering to God, perverting His requirements. Did he not bring an offering that was all of self? Produce from the ground, that he had grown, that he had person interest in, from his labour, his work, his efforts, as a favour done partial obedience, the efforts of a legalist. Cain knew what God required. Cain's offering was rejected. It was one of salvation by works. The essential part – the acknowledgement of the need of the Saviour, the Redeemer, was omitted, left out. Christ had no part in Cain's offering, as Christ has no part in the offering of works from the legalist. Good works have no merits for salvation. There is a salvation for you and for me, but only through the merits of Jesus Christ.

Testimonies to Ministers, p 97.

"We do not earn salvation by our obedience, for salvation is the free gift of God to be received by faith. Obedience is the fruit of faith.

Steps to Christ p 61

“If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.” Matthew 19:17

It is considered understandable that some sincere Adventist have reservations about a commandment such as this, and other commandments, calling for obedience to the law, when they believe they are saved by faith and then there are others who believe the law has been done away with. They have a fear of being called legalists. To some extent, this is warranted, for any hint of a legalistic attitude in the life, in their Christian walk, is a denial and a negation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For we are saved by grace through faith, not of works. Jesus strongly upheld the law, but it was always within the context of the gospel and was an essential part of life. There was, and is, a harmonious relationship between the two. Any deviation to the left or to the right, unbalances, upsets the relationship of faith and works to the gospel. For one either becomes a legalist going to the left, or one that believes in salvation by grace alone and the law nailed to the cross – going to the right. Either position is wrong. Jesus, in answering the rich, young ruler's question on the key to eternal life, replied, “If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.” And to clarify this matter, I quote from:

DA p 523

“Christ's dealing with the young man is presented as an object lesson. God has given us the rule of conduct which every one of His servants must follow. It is obedience to His law, not merely a legal obedience, but an obedience which enters into the life, and is exemplified in the character.”

It is an amalgamation of the two extremes. It is Christ working within the believer that establishes and maintains the equilibrium between the two extremes in the life of the committed Christian.

Friends, in most cases it is obvious in whom Christ is dwelling for Christ's righteousness is displayed in the life, the demeanour, the character. The attributes of Christ are evidenced in the life by God's indwelling Holy Spirit.

Galatians 5:22,23

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, 23 Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.”

From the statement in DA 523 which I have just read, it appears that there are two forms of obedience when in reality there is only one true obedience which qualifies the believer for eternal life. Satan always counterfeits the genuine and he counterfeits obedience. We have presented to us, the true or false obedience; the love-response obedience as against legalistic obedience and a counterfeit obedience against genuine obedience. Any form of legalistic obedience has its origins in fear due to a false understanding of a wrathful, vengeful God as seen in pagan religions. Genuine obedience is based on a love response to God's invitation to be remade into the likeness of His loving character.

Christ has set us free. He freed us by His life unto death. He freed from those things which hinder us from living in an obedient relationship to Him – namely the power of Satan and the power of sin. Liberated from them, we are free to live as He directs and are empowered to do so, by His holy spirit.

Isaiah 30:21

“And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.”

What is the major difference between the two forms of obedience? One springs from a heart possessed of divine love and the other purely of self. One is the total surrender to Christ and the other self still has, and is in control. Sister White places the matter of legalism in its true perspective in:

DA p 172 “There is no safety for one who has merely a legal religion, a form of godliness.”

The works of self are legalistic. “Christ is the sole basis of merit for man's redemption and there is no other way we are to receive the righteousness of Christ which is made manifest in obedience to all the commandments of God” TM p 92. Only in Christ is there any hope for any one of us. There is no room for self. In the days surrounding the 1888 message of righteousness by faith, by Waggoner and Jones, many were emphasising the importance of the law and Sister White wrote:

TM p 92. “The Lord in his great mercy sent a most precious message to his people through Elders Waggoner and Jones. (continued) “This message was to bring more prominently before the world the uplifted Saviour, the sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It presented justification through faith in the Surety; it invited the people to receive the righteousness of Christ, which is made manifest in obedience to all the commandments of God. Many had lost sight of Jesus. They needed to have their eyes directed to his divine person, his merits, and his changeless love for the human family.”

Many had allowed an imbalance to occur in their Christian walk. Christ alone is the sole basis for the salvation acts of God on behalf of man.. Many a Christian obeys the law because he regards it a duty which must be done in order to be saved. This is legalism, whereas a person who is under grace is one who believe with his whole heart, that in Jesus Christ, he has full and complete salvation as a free gift. He has a love response to God the Father and His son Jesus Christ, for the plan of salvation and for the willing sacrifice made by His Son Jesus Christ, for man's redemption.

He is motivated by love for Christ and by Christ living within. He willingly obeys God's word without fear of punishment. To the believer, who regards obedience to the law as a duty, which must be done in order to be save, Paul counsels in Rom 3:20, "therefore by the deeds of the law there shall be no flesh justified in His sight." (to be declared righteous) before God. It cannot be attained by the deeds of the law. Quoting Steps to Christ p 62, "If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ's character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned." (Justification)

The relationship of faith, as the key to the acceptance of the provisions of God, for salvation through Jesus Christ, must emphasize the fact that man's good works provide no part of the basis for man's salvation. God works only reveal the quality of that faith, in that obedience brings forth the fruit of that faith.

Ephesians 2:8, 9

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: .9
Not of works, lest any man should boast."

Could anything be clearer? We are not saved by the works of the legalistic, mandatory keeping of God's commandments, devoid of Christ- that is an empty and dead religion. This matter is made very clear in:.

DA p 280,

"A legal religion can never lead souls to Christ; for it is a loveless, Christ-less religion. ... Fasting or prayer that is actuated by a self-justifying spirit is an abomination in the sight of God. The solemn assembly for worship, the round of religious ceremonies, the external humiliation, the imposing sacrifice, proclaim that the doer of these things regards himself as righteous, and as entitled to heaven; but it is all a deception. Our own works can never purchase salvation."

(continued)

“As it was in the days of Christ, so it is now; the Pharisees (of today) do not know their spiritual destitution. To them comes the (Laodicean) message, “Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:” Rev. 3:17. The remedy to these problems is found in Christ. Christ offers us the new nature, the new mind. He makes us a new creature. “Man must be emptied of self before he can be, in the fullest sense, a believer in Jesus. When self is renounced, then the Lord can make man a new creature... The love of Christ will animate the believer with new life. In him who looks unto the Author and Finisher of our faith the character of Christ will be manifest.”

The law is the character of God. (8 T 607). Legalism is justice without mercy, the principle of the law without the loving, gentle spirit of the law. Just as Christ revealed the Father's character was full of love and compassion, so there will be no harsh nor cruel attitude of legalism in the life of those who have the fullness of God residing in them.

DA p 278-279

“While they remained satisfied with a legal religion, it was impossible for them to become the depositaries of the living truth of heaven. They thought their own righteousness all-sufficient, and did not desire that a new element should be brought into their religion. The good will of God to men they did not accept as something apart from themselves. They connected it with their own merit because of their good works. The faith that works by love and purifies the soul could find no place for union with the religion of the Pharisees, made up of ceremonies and the injunctions of men. The effort to unite the teachings of Jesus with the established religion would be vain. The vital truth of God, like fermenting wine, would burst the old, decaying bottles of the Pharisaical tradition. The Pharisees thought themselves too wise to need instruction, too righteous to need salvation, too highly honored to need the honor that comes from Christ. The Saviour turned away from them to find others who would receive the message of heaven. “

We have a wonderful Saviour in Jesus Christ. Not only does He provide His perfect life as a substitute for man's imperfect life, but He makes His divine power available that man may have a life of victory in His strength.

Friends, let us be wary of the trap of legalism, locked into a useless journey of salvation by works and may all your good works be as a result of the gift of Christ's Righteousness, the indwelling Christ in your soul. Christ in you the hope of glory. May this be to each one's experience, all to His glory.