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Law and Grace

THE REV. H. L. ELLISON, B.D., B.A.

A FEW years ago the annual conference of the German Baptist ministers of Roumania was held in Bucarest. For one of their sessions they invited a prominent representative of Seventh Day Adventism—a very active body in that country—to come and explain his position. As I was desirous of hearing an authoritative exposition of Adventist teaching, I readily obtained permission to be present. We were dumbfounded, when the Adventist began by reading a long extract from a sermon of Spurgeon's on "Sabbath Observance"¹ and saying, "That is our position, except that we in consistent loyalty to the Scriptures keep Saturday and not Sunday." What is more, he was not being unfair. If the views expressed in the sermon were accepted, there would be no Scripturally valid grounds for not keeping Saturday. The chairman gave the only possible answer, "However much we respect and admire Spurgeon, we cannot accept him as an authority, for our sole authority is the word of God."

The moral of this incident is obvious. Legalism has always been one of the subtlest and deadliest foes of true religion, and few there can be that have not at one time or another been affected and weakened by it. If a great preacher and teacher of the grace of God like Spurgeon could on occasion use language calculated to rejoice the heart of an extreme legalist, it only serves to show how real the danger for each one of us must be.

Legalism was after all the cause of the first great controversy in the Church.

If anyone doubts that it is a rank and gross offence before God, he need only ponder our Lord's scathing attacks on the Pharisees. It cannot be too deeply regretted

¹ The extract was read from the authoritative German translation of Spurgeon's sermons, but I have not been in a position to check up the English title of the sermon in question.

that *ὑποκριτής* was very early misinterpreted and mistranslated (if we may use the term of a transliteration) as hypocrite. We suspect it was due in all sincerity to men in whom the leaven of the Pharisees had done a deadly work, though they knew it not. We have no doubt that Lukyn Williams is correct, when he argues for the translation "play-actor."¹ Our Lord was not condemning that deception by which evil men would fain deceive others, but that self-deception by which sincere men deceive themselves to their own destruction. The Pharisee wished to be well-pleasing to God, and he played the part of the good man (and he played it well, too), until he had persuaded himself, and most others, that he was good and well-pleasing to God. If any one doubts this interpretation of the Pharisees, let him ponder the fact that though hypocrisy is a sin universally detested and easily detected, the Pharisees were through generations looked up to as the religious leaders of Israel.

Legalism is peculiarly harmful, for by it it is just the noble and upright who are blinded until the wonder of the grace of God becomes meaningless to them. All who have had to do with the legalist, whether Jew or Gentile, whether bound by the Law of Moses or that of his church, or by the law of his conscience or of humanitarian ethics, will have found a peculiar obtuseness, which simply cannot grasp the meaning of grace. Even if the language of Scripture is accepted, it is twisted in some way and emptied of its true meaning.

Legalism would be evil enough, if this were all the harm it does, but its pernicious influence is much more far-reaching. Our Lord warned His disciples, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod."² "The leaven of the Pharisees" is the leaven of religious legalism. For every one that openly espouses and preaches legalism in one of its many forms, there must be at least a hundred subtly influenced and poisoned by it. It may even be maintained that legalism in its aspect as leaven is more harmful and deadly than in its direct and undiluted form. Legalism is always liable to break down under the stress of overmastering sin, and it has no comfort to bring the heart crying aloud in the dark for God's mercy and grace. When it works as a subtle leaven, it flatters that side in human nature that

¹ *Talmudic Judaism and Christianity.*

² Mark viii. 15.

welcomes legalism, but still seems to leave room for the grace of God, and so the victim does not realize his disease. There must be myriads suffering from the influence of legalism who do not realize it, and who would probably be indignant, if told so.

This subtle working of legalism can be easily observed by those with eyes to see in "evangelical" Christianity, quite irrespective of denomination; it is probably the main reason why it is so often so ineffective in the world to-day. To-day the preaching of the cross is as much a stumbling-block and foolishness as it was in the days of the Apostles. There is no more reason to expect any overwhelming response to-day, when the Crucified Christ is preached, than there was at Corinth. Now as then, the messenger of Christ should be not only "a sweet savour of Christ unto God . . . from life unto life in them that are being saved," but also "from death unto death in them that are perishing."¹ Unfortunately so many to-day seem to be neither. There is apparently a certain quality lacking in their message and life, without which they rouse neither enthusiasm nor opposition, and we attribute that lack very largely to the subtle poison of legalism.

The reasons for this widespread influence of legalism are not hard to find. The way is often prepared for it in earliest childhood. Almost all children—we might perhaps say all but a few victims of extreme psychological and pedagogic theories—are brought up to a greater or less degree on "You must do this" and "You mustn't do that." It is difficult to see how this could be avoided, especially in the child's earliest and most impressionable years. With all due respect to certain psychologists, it is very doubtful whether any harm at all is done, provided that those that do the commanding have won the love of the child and are really trying to understand him and help him. Thus with few exceptions children grow up with the idea of law accompanying them at every step. The effect on the child of this realization will depend entirely on the way in which he has been made aware of it. Unfortunately, where there is still religious training and teaching given, most children are introduced to God first of all as the great Ruler and Law-

¹ 2 Corinthians ii. 15, 16.

giver, and not as the great Lover ; they are expected to obey God before they have learnt to love Him. Many parents and teachers too have been and still are sufficiently short-sighted or lacking in knowledge of God to use the Divine authority to reinforce their own insufficient moral authority. Inevitably the child comes to look on God's law and God's will as something arbitrary. To conceive of God's law as something arbitrary and then to *obey it*, probably reluctantly, must produce legalism. So it is that most persons brought up with any religious background at all have legalism deeply ingrained in them. It forms part of their subconscious mind, and it is doubtful whether it is ever completely eradicated, even in those granted the deepest insight into the grace of God.

We are convinced that this so frequent wrong introduction to God and His will is, in part at least, the explanation of one of our saddest problems. It has often been commented on with grief how many children of staunch Evangelicals either never arrive at personal faith in Christ, or if they do, it so often is different to that of their parents and untrue to the word of God. We are suggesting that in most cases it is due in the first place to a wrong introduction to God. Its effect is often aggravated as the child grows older. With that keen insight of childhood we so often forget he realizes the contradiction in his parents' lives, a contradiction they are very often ignorant of themselves. With their lips they proclaim the grace of God, but in their lives they are in bondage to law. Influenced as he is by his earliest training the child is naturally inclined to assume that his parents' religion has little meaning or is even only a sham.

A healthy infant's earliest sorrows generally arise from its growing awareness that he is surrounded by other persons and things, which inflexibly limit his still limited desires ; moreover, though the infant is not aware of this, much of this limitation is for his own good. His experience remains essentially the same all through life, though his awareness of it and his reaction to it change. Although we all treasure the certainty that we are free agents, and account liberty one of the greatest of life's boons, yet we all go through life strictly limited—limited by the laws of nature, by the laws of our own make-up, by the laws and customs of the society we live in, by our bodily needs, by the life we have already

lived. Determinism is a purely philosophical concept against which the average mind instinctively revolts, yet the freedom enjoyed by any individual, even the most favoured, is strictly limited.

The reaction of the *average* man to the claims of God are exactly what might be expected. He emphatically and bitterly denies the claim of God's word, that his liberty is an illusion, and that he is but a slave, a slave of sin,¹ that behind his actions, both *good* and bad, sin rears its triumphant head²—"so it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me."³ He has no understanding for and no patience with the view that perfect freedom is the outcome of being perfectly mastered by Christ. To be the "slave" of Jesus Christ holds out no attractions for him. At the same time he is so tied and bound by law, habit and custom in his own life, that the very idea, were it even to occur to him, of his moral and spiritual life being lived without law would be repellent. So it is that he accepts whatever form of moral law and religious custom the period and society enjoin, and that normally with little, if any, hesitation. If he rebels against any part of it, it will normally be found that a considerable section of public opinion condones his action, or even actively supports him.

We have seen how earliest influences, religious training, and the natural inclinations of man all conspire to make a legalist, to a greater or less degree, of him. If we are to understand the baleful influence of legalism we must go further and examine its real meaning. There is unfortunately much misunderstanding on the subject, even among those who unreservedly accept Pauline teaching. This is in part due to the natural depravity of the human heart, which does not want to know and understand, in part to a misunderstanding of the Jewish background of the New Testament.

It is widely believed that the fight between Paul and the "Judaizers" was one about rites and ceremonies only, about the ceremonial law, of which circumcision was the symbol. Paul never repudiated the moral law, so it is said, although this accusation was brought against him. One might have

¹ John viii. 34.

² Romans vii. 14-21.

³ Romans vii. 17.

thought that his epistles were clear enough as to the issue involved, but for those who will not see and understand Jewish teaching ought to be convincing. The Orthodox Jew knew, and knows, nothing of any division of the Law into moral and ceremonial; for him it was an indivisible whole. Naturally he recognized that certain commandments were more important than others, but the deliberate breach of any commandment was equally heinous, even though the consequences might not be equally serious. Further, in the varying divisions of the commandments into "light" and "heavy" whatever the guiding principles may have been, the idea of moral and ceremonial was quite certainly not present.

The pious Jew recognized only three possibilities for a Gentile. He might continue in his heathen ways; he had then no place in "the world to come," and in theory at least would be expelled from a Jewish-controlled Palestine. He might take on himself "the commandments of the sons of Noah," in which case there was at least hope for him in "the world to come"; he was allowed to live in Palestine and could have some measure of intercourse with Jews. These commandments concerned idolatry, blasphemy, murder, incest, robbery, justice, and eating of blood. The first six are supposed to have been revealed to Adam and the seventh to Noah; according to Rabbinic teaching they are binding on all men. The third and only other possibility was for him to take on him the "yoke of the Law" and become an Israelite; the outward signs of his so doing were *circumcision*, baptism, and sacrifice. To a Jew Paul's rejection of circumcision could only have meant one thing; it was not merely the rejection of a ceremonial act, but the repudiation of the whole Law of Moses, moral as well as ceremonial.

To us it seems that this is borne out by the decision of the Council of Jerusalem, ". . . we write unto them that they abstain from the pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from what is strangled, and from blood."¹ It has been very forcibly argued that "fornication" here is to be understood as marriage within the prohibited degrees, and we do not doubt that this is correct. If it is, we have three of the "commandments of the sons of Noah," idolatry, incest and eating of blood (four if "blood" is taken to mean the shed-

¹ Acts xv. 20.

ding of human blood, but this is unlikely). This can hardly be a mere coincidence. It is easy to see why all were not mentioned. Even if we grant that the full list of seven had been worked out by that time, and this cannot be taken for granted, those left unmentioned were things that could well be assumed in a Christian. This interpretation is rendered the more likely because of the reason given, "For Moses from generations of old hath in every city them that preach him."¹ In order not to offend the Jews the Church would ask the same minimum of the Gentile convert as the Jew asked of "the sons of Noah." But, and this is the important point, the Jew expressly exempted such persons from any obligation to keep any part of the Law of Moses.²

This conception of the unity of the Law is borne out, if indeed it needs further confirmation, by the fact that there is no evidence that any of the Apostles ever rejected any portion of the Law either for themselves or for their Jewish converts. It is true that this charge was brought against Paul,³ but the whole narrative implies that the accusation was false, and if it were not Paul's behaviour would be incomprehensible. The evidence is overwhelming that they kept the Law in a manner sufficiently exact for no valid objection to be raised on that score by their detractors.

Our Lord, too, kept the whole Law without any differentiation into moral and ceremonial. His quarrel with the Scribes and Pharisees was not about ceremonial, but about the "traditions of the elders," the "hedge" they had set about the Law. It was a fixed principle among the Pharisees, dating back long before the time of Christ, that the safest way of safeguarding the 613 commandments of the Law was to surround each with a hedge of man-made commandments. If this hedge were not broken down or climbed over then the commandment it was protecting would be bound to be kept. It was no portion of the Law our Lord rejected, but this "hedge," and so we may presume did His disciples. The Pharisees had not yet succeeded in completely dominating Jewish religion, and so it was easier to reject the "hedge" than it would have been a century later.

¹ Acts xv. 21.

² The very early modification in the "Western" text shows how quickly the true significance of the decision was lost, and an effort made to make it bear a moral character.

³ Acts xxi. 17-26.

We stand then before the fact that Paul with the full approval of the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem rejected the Law of Moses *in toto* so far as his *Gentile* converts were concerned. The anonymous writer to the Hebrews, strongly influenced by Paul, by his insistence on the transitory nature of part of the Law (the sacrificial portion) in fact teaches the transitory nature of the whole Law, and so the Jewish convert, at any rate from the destruction of the Temple, is brought also from under the Law. But can we accept that for the Christian there is no law of any kind, that the moral law has gone the way of the ceremonial?

We use the word "law" in two dissimilar senses. When we speak of the "laws of nature" we now mean (whatever may have been the case in earlier centuries) simply a scientific statement regarding the nature of things and the way they will in consequence act. The laws of gravity are not principles forced on matter by some outside power, but a statement of how matter will act under certain conditions because of its inherent nature. Human laws, whether aesthetic, moral or statutory are in large measure arbitrary and often have no necessity about them. The laws of nature cannot be broken, or rather the person or thing doing so must first change its inherent nature. Human laws can be broken with ease, and often with impunity. When we speak of the "laws of God" we may in fact be using the expression in both senses. They may be an expression of some of the Divine characteristics, a finite statement in human language of some of the ways God must act, just because He is God and cannot deny His nature. Then again we use the expression to refer to certain revelations of God's will, by one channel or another, to man. Then it is a case of laws imposed from without, laws that can be and are broken with ease (though not with impunity) without man ceasing to be man, for these laws are not an essential expression of the nature of man.

Herein is seen in perhaps the clearest light the tragic position of man. He was made in the image of God,¹ and God's law should be an expression of his own nature, only to be heard to be welcomed, to be recognized as that to which his heart was instinctively striving. In fact, the Fall demanded a change in man's nature (for sin is a contradiction

¹ Genesis i. 27.

of the Divine), and the Divine image has been marred, though by the grace of God not completely effaced. So it is that there is much in God's law that is normally welcomed and accepted as natural, and even incorporated in man's own laws. But in every man, in some more, in some less, there is rebellion against the law of God; in some it may seldom receive outward expression, but it is always there. Man feels the law of God to be an external compulsion to which at the best he bows unwillingly. By his rebellion against the law of God man reveals that his nature is not Divine—he is dominated by another force; "it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me."¹ That is why "unless a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God,"² for "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God."³ "Cannot"; it is no arbitrary decision on the part of God, but a statement of fundamental law.

No man uninfluenced by the grace of God can accept this. "No man can come to Me, except the Father . . . draw him."⁴ Men point to "there is so much good in the worst of us" without realizing that God is not really concerned with good and bad. The fact that the good man and the bad man alike, unless it be for the grace of God, are in rebellion against the will of God shows that man is of another nature, that by the very immutable nature of things he cannot have fellowship with God and cannot inherit the kingdom of God; in the light of that fact questions of relative merit lose all meaning. A bad man is simply one in whom the rebellion takes an open form, or one condemned by public opinion, while the good man is one who keeps it for the most part shut up in his heart and who cares for the opinion of his fellow-men, but the rebellion is the same and has the same consequences.

One of the commonest and most widespread ideas among religious persons in Christendom is that Satan by his machinations is the cause of most sin. Nowhere in Scripture is there any evidence for this belief. Though Satan is the cause of some sin, yet man himself is the cause of most.

¹ Romans vii. 17.

² John iii. 3. margin.

³ 1 Corinthians xv. 50.

⁴ John vi. 44.

James gives us the normal process quite clearly.¹ Man sins because "he is drawn away by his own lust and enticed." It is the evil, fallen and rebellious nature of man that responds to the stimulus of the events of the outside world. So God is not so much concerned with the sins committed as with the sinful nature that by its own natural laws must beget sins. That nature, because it is nature, cannot be changed except by God Himself.

There are only three possibilities before men. They may give their rebellious nature its freedom, caring nothing for the possible consequences; they may seek to mask it by living a life that is a contradiction of it; or they may in despair throw themselves on the mercy of God. We need not concern ourselves with the first group. For the second the Pharisees may stand as representatives. One who had been of their number could look back and say, "As touching the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless."² The Pharisee rejoiced in the Law, he carried it out eagerly, he delighted in finding fresh commandments to keep. As Rabbi Chananiah Ben-Aqashia used to say, "The Holy One, blessed be He, was pleased to make Israel meritorious; wherefore He gave them much Torah (law) and many commandments."³ The Pharisee knew all about his evil heart, or "evil inclination"⁴ as he called it, but he delighted to cover it up and mask it with layer upon layer of law-keeping. By perseverance in doing good he persuaded himself that his heart was not so corrupt and did not matter very much. That is why our Lord called him "ὑποκριτής," "play-actor." That is why His severest words were kept for him, for such a man finds it harder than any other to accept the verdict of God on his life. We may be sure though that Paul was not the only one to realize that strange phenomenon, "I should not have known what covetousness is, if the Law did not say, 'Thou shalt not covet.' Sin took advantage of this, and by means of the commandment roused within me every kind of coveting."⁵ In other words the Pharisees did not keep the Law because their nature demanded it. Nay

¹ James i. 13-15.

² Philippians iii. 20.

³ Pirge Aboth.

⁴ Yetser harah.

⁵ Romans vii. 7, 8. Weymouth.

rather they kept it in spite of the deep-seated dislike and urge the other way, because they wished to win God's favour without humbling themselves before God. The Rabbinic writings quite typically place the man who keeps the Law in spite of his inclinations higher than the man who keeps it because of his inclinations.

Such is all legalism. It is the supreme and subtlest expression of sin and man's sinful nature. Man does good, even though he would rather not, so as to win God's favour. He will do anything rather than humble himself before God completely. He will even humble himself and confess all manner of sins so long as his humiliation must not be complete, so long as he must not confess indwelling, dominating sin, the sin that is his by nature. We have the paradox that good is really being done "by the sin that dwelleth in me."¹

But what of the man who by the grace of God is brought to see himself, as he is seen by God? He can only do one thing, cast himself in despair on God. For him there can be no hope except in the mercy of God, and because "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself"² he knows that his hope will not be put to shame. The essential purpose of salvation is to make true fellowship between God and man possible, and that is only possible, if man is granted a Divine nature. That is why he "must be born from above." When that happens he receives "a new heart and a new spirit."³ For such a man keeping God's laws involves as little merit as a duckling taking to the water and swimming; he is only expressing an inherent law of his new nature. That is why John can say, "Whosoever is begotten of God doeth no sin, because his seed abideth in him; and he cannot sin, because he is begotten of God."⁴ For a re-born man to acquiesce in sin, for the core of his being to rebel against the will of God, for him wholeheartedly to say Yes to temptation, even though the impulse is not acted on, would be a denial of the new Divine nature in him.

There is no suggestion in this that the man re-born by the grace of God is irresistibly carried away by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit, so that he is made sinless. Just

¹ Romans vii. 15-17.

² 2 Corinthians v. 19.

³ Ezekiel xxxvi. 26, 27.

⁴ 1 John iii. 9.

as in the unregenerate man there is always a conflict between his sinful nature and law, whether it is recognized as Divine law or not, so it is in the regenerate. "The cravings of the lower nature are opposed to the Spirit, and the Spirit is opposed to the lower nature, because these are antagonistic to each other, so that you cannot do as you would wish."¹ There is, however, a profound difference. In the unregenerate the conflict is caused by the impact of Divine law *from outside* on sin within; in the regenerate the conflict is due to the impact of "the world, the flesh and the devil" from outside on the nature of God *within*. The former conflict can be ended (unless the man bow in despair before God) only by the triumph of sin; the latter can only be ended by the triumph of the Spirit.

That is why Paul makes no reservation whatsoever in his rejection of the Law, for it was imposed from without by God. The triumph of the Spirit within—"Walk by the Spirit and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh"²—of itself involves the removal of all fetters. "If ye are led by the Spirit, ye are not under the Law."³ This after all should be self-evident. If we have the Divine nature within us, if we are led by the Spirit of God Himself, then all external law is superfluous—"Knowing this, that law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and unruly, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane . . . for liars, for false swearers, and if there be any other thing contrary to the sound doctrine."⁴ As Ezekiel foretold, "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgements and do them."⁵ That is why Jeremiah could foresee the day when "They shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD."⁶ This is "the liberty of the glory of the children of God,"⁷ which in its fullness awaits "the redemption of our body," but

¹ Galatians v. 17, Weymouth.

² Galatians v. 16.

³ Galatians v. 18.

⁴ 1 Timothy i. 9, 10.

⁵ Ezekiel xxxvi. 27.

⁶ Jeremiah xxxi. 34.

⁷ Romans viii. 21.

which none the less is the privilege now of all God's children, of all "born from above."

Just as unregenerate man will not accept God's judgment on him, so too he cannot bring himself to accept the possibility of the Spirit-led life. So evil is the "flesh," so subtle the poison of legalism, that many who claim to be regenerate share in that doubt. The reasons are too manifold even to be glanced at here. It often is because they have never taken that decisive and final step of *complete* humiliation before God; there has remained a lurking hope that somewhere in them there is something that may yet be saved from the general ruin. Others shrink from it, for it implies a tolerance of the Spirit-led and their actions that mere man cannot reach. "Who art thou that judgest the servant of another? to his own lord he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be made to stand; for the Lord hath power to make him stand."¹ Above all it is because they listen to the last desperate plea of the "flesh." To those who will listen it paints lurid pictures of the slavery involved, of the uncertainty, of the laughing stock we may become, and then as a contrast it tells with siren voice of the beauty of the regenerate and forgiven man doing that which before was impossible for him, keeping God's law. Many there are that listen, as did the Galatians. And sin, as long as we are kept from complete reliance on the grace of God alone, is satisfied.

Legalism is the deadliest product of man's unregenerate nature. It has been the means of hardening the hearts of untold men and women to the voice of God. But even when the heart has yielded, the struggle goes on, and legalism remains sin's chief weapon. Self-reliance in one form or another is always trying to raise its head, and when it does mistrust and rebellion always accompany it. There is only one place where sin ceases from poisoning our lives, and the Law finally and for ever vanishes from our thoughts. If we will accept fully God's judgment on our sin, if we are willing to humble all in the dust, if we are brought to despair of everything that we are, then we can say with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me."²

¹ Romans xiv. 4.

² Galatians ii. 20.