

Legalism and Grace

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Because the book [Warning! Revelation is about to be fulfilled](#) supports the concept of [God's Sabbath rest on the seventh day of the week](#), people often use the argument that the book promotes legalism and they choose to dismiss the entire book. Unfortunately, most Christians do not observe Saturday as a holy day and further, they misunderstand the differences between legalism and grace.

If Sabbath observance is so important, why don't more Christians know about it? Many people get excited that Revelation will soon be fulfilled, but their excitement quickly ends when they learn that God's seventh day Sabbath will be an issue that separates the sheep from the goats during the Great Tribulation. Before we address the reasons why people call Sabbath worship legalism, we need to consider some basic information regarding legalism and grace.

As far as God is concerned, there are only two types of human beings: Those who submit to the ministry of the Holy Spirit and those who rebel against it. **"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."** (1 Corinthians 2:14) A person does not become a born again person on his own. A rebellious person becomes a born again person when the Holy Spirit finally manages to bring a person to the point he will "surrender all" to Jesus.

No person can serve two masters; therefore, giving up self-mastery and allowing Jesus to be Lord and Master is a very difficult thing to do. When a person "surrenders all," he becomes a different person. The Holy Spirit enables him to love God with all of his heart, mind, and soul, and his neighbors as himself, because without the Holy Spirit within, loving God is contrary to his sinful nature.

When a born again person walks with the Lord, he soon discovers that what he thought was 100% surrender is more like 5% surrender because no one can know the depth of his surrender until he is challenged. The Holy Spirit is like a dentist who uses a bright light to look in our mouths for sensitive spots and hidden cavities.

The Holy Spirit searches our hearts for sensitive spots with the light of truth, to find hidden places where selfishness resides. When the Spirit finds a defect in our character, He reveals this deficiency so that we can overcome it through Christ's power.

The Holy Spirit endeavors to transform us into a perfect reflection of Christ's character of love. Many Christians "think" they have surrendered to the Lord, but they lack experience surrendering to the Holy Spirit. Remember, Peter said (with 100% conviction) that he was prepared to go to his death for his Lord (Luke 22:33) and then, a few hours later, he denied that he even knew Jesus. (Luke 22:57-61)

Peter did not know his heart and was unaware of the defects lurking in his character. When Peter denied knowing Jesus, the Holy Spirit finally got through and Peter saw, for the first time, a huge defect in his character. Conversely, Judas refused to acknowledge the defect in his character. Instead of overcoming his defect, it overcame him and he took his life.

The story of Saul/Paul's conversion is profound. As a Pharisee, he was zealous for his religious beliefs. He believed that God required rigorous obedience to obtain salvation and Saul was absolutely rigorous in "measuring up" to God's requirements. His zeal explains why he persecuted Christians.

Paul was concerned that certain Jews who followed the teachings of Jesus did not obey God's laws. Therefore, on the basis of Deuteronomy 13, Saul went about eliminating heresy from Israel. Then one day, while on the way to persecute more Christians, Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus.

This event was a life changing experience. Saul learned that God's commandments are spiritual instead of external. (Romans 7:14) As a Pharisee, Saul kept the law because he thought obeying the law pleased God, but later he learned the god he was zealous to please was not the God of Heaven; it was a god called "religion."

As a Pharisee, Saul had been faultless in terms of legalistic righteousness (Philippians 3:5,6), but when Paul became a Christian, he discovered that he could never measure up to the demands of the law on his own! (Romans 7:15-18)

As Paul began to understand the spiritual nature of the Ten Commandments, he discovered that he had ten passions (which each of the Ten Commandments define) that are offensive to God. Saul thought he was in perfect compliance with the tenth commandment (which defines the passion of covetousness and jealousy) until he met Jesus.

Then, Paul discovered that he had never complied with it. (Romans 7:7,8) When Paul discovered that he could not remove covetousness and jealousy from his heart, the law brought Paul to the realization that he needed a Savior, full of grace and truth. (Romans 7:22-25) Paul also discovered that victory over every passion is only possible through Christ.

Saul/Paul's insight and experience with God's laws is a profound lesson for all of us. Saul changed from being perfectly legalistic to Paul, "the chief of sinners," spiritually speaking. (1 Timothy 1:15) When Paul finally saw his own defects, he realized that he could not measure up spiritually to the purity which the law requires and it made him realize the critical importance of God's grace. Many people distort Paul's writings (2 Peter 3:16), but Paul is clear. Grace and faith does not abolish the law, for where there is no law, there is no need for grace. (Romans 4:15, 3:31; 6:1,2)

I have mentioned Saul becoming Paul to show that there is a legalistic approach to the Ten Commandments (including the Sabbath commandment) and there is a spiritual approach. The legalistic approach is conceived in self-righteousness and it is all about measuring up externally.

Merely resting from work on the Sabbath as the fourth commandment dictates *does not* fulfill the law. The spiritual approach is much more intimate and difficult. It can be a hard thing to give up *a whole day* to the Lord each week. Not using the Sabbath for our own pleasure or personal advantage can be difficult. The essential difference between a holiday and a holy day is ownership of the day. Jesus owns His Sabbath. (Mark 2:27,28) We own whatever holidays we may create. (For further discussion on observing the Sabbath, please download this article: <https://www.wake-up.org/daystar/ds2000/MARA.htm>.)

Unlike the pagans, every Christian has two minds – a sinful mind (the natural mind) and a spiritual mind (the mind that comes through the ministry of the Holy Spirit) – and there is a war between them. (Romans 7:23) Paul wrote, **"Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is [leads to] death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is [leads to] life and peace; the sinful mind is [naturally] hostile to God [God's authority]. It does not [voluntarily] submit to God's law, nor can it do so."** (Romans 8:5-7, insertions mine)

With an understanding of the legalistic and spiritual approaches to God's law, let us consider the following statements regarding Sabbath keeping:

First Statement

"It really doesn't matter which day a person worships on. We should worship the Lord seven days a week."

Given what this argument actually says (instead of what it is attempting to say), there is nothing wrong with this statement. Conducting or attending worship services seven days a week is fine. There is no commandment requiring or forbidding this in the Bible. However, this argument has nothing to do with the requirements given in the fourth commandment. The fourth commandment is not about worshiping the Lord seven days a week. The fourth commandment is about giving the seventh day of the week to the Lord:

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." (Exodus 20:11)

God has decreed that six days are allotted for work and the seventh day is not allotted for work. He rested from His work on the seventh day and made it holy at Creation, not at Mt. Sinai. (See Genesis 2:1-3.) This is why the first word in the fourth commandment is "Remember. . .". The Sabbath stands as a memorial to His creation (of which we are a part) and mankind is commanded to cease from our work each Sabbath day to honor *His* creative work.

You would think that the whole world would welcome God's Sabbath. Unfortunately, the Sabbath is generally loathed because human nature rebels and does not want give up a whole day. Paul said it well, "**Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires . . . the sinful mind is [naturally] hostile to God [God's authority]. It does not [voluntarily] submit to God's law, nor can it do so.**"

Thirty years after Paul became a Christian, he had no question about the importance of the fourth commandment. He wrote, "**There remains [forever], then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work [on the seventh day], just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest [each week], so that no one will fall [miss out on entering the Promised Land] by following their example of [defiance and] disobedience.**" (Hebrews 4:9-11, insertions mine)

Second Statement

"The Ten Commandments were nailed to the cross (abolished). Since the Sabbath commandment is not re-commanded in the New Testament, there is no further obligation to keep the seventh day holy."

Think about this: Why would God immediately restore nine of the Ten Commandments that He just abolished? Even more, why will God show the Ark of the Covenant from Heaven at the seventh trumpet (Revelation 11:19) if the Ten Commandments were abolished at the cross? The Ten Commandments were not abolished at the cross and remember that Paul specifically addressed the continuation of the Sabbath commandment in Hebrews 4:9 (see previous paragraph).

The truth of the matter is clear. If a person does not want to give up a whole day to the Lord, it does not really matter whether the Ten Commandments were abolished or whether they remain obligatory. Rebellion against God's Sabbath confirms what Paul said, "**The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.**" (Romans 8:7)

Pressing a spiritual argument on the carnal nature naturally causes rebellion to spring up. This happens to all of us. However, when truth is heard, the Holy Spirit goes to work, leading us into all truth. (John 16:13) There is a right way and a wrong way of entering into the Sabbath experience. The wrong way is through legalism. The right way is through the Holy Spirit.

Third Statement

"Everyone keeping the Sabbath commandment is trying to work his way to Heaven. Under the new covenant, we are saved by grace, not by works."

The challenge in responding to this statement is to differentiate between what is legalistic and what is spiritual. Consider this: The Pharisees claimed they kept the seventh commandment because they had not physically sinned. But Jesus addressed this self-deception when He said to them: "**But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed**

adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:28)

Jesus highlighted the spiritual nature of the law. You do not have to physically commit adultery to break the law because the Ten Commandments actually define ten sinful passions. Because the law is spiritual, Jesus reprimanded the Pharisees (Israel's spiritual guides) for missing the greater meaning of the law.

If a person does not steal, is he a legalist? If a person does not tell a lie, is he a legalist? If a person obeys the first three commandments, is he a legalist? Are we legalistic if we rest on the seventh day because God commands it? *It depends on the nature of our relationship with the law.*

If, like Saul, we obey the law and think we are righteous before God, we are a legalist. On the other hand, if we obey the law realizing it has been given to expose our defects, we become "chief of sinners" and like Peter and Paul, we realize our desperate need of a Savior who freely offers grace and transforming power!

The best argument you can give to rebut the charge of legalism is an understanding smile. Accusations usually say more about the accuser than about the one being condemned. The carnal heart is unwilling to give the Lord a whole day. However, do not underestimate the Holy Spirit.

He is at work and there will always be people who discover what Paul discovered. The Ten Commandments are spiritual. Do not worry about those who scorn the Sabbath and slander those of us who love it. Be courteous and move on. Jesus said, "**Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in Heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**" (Matthew 5:11,12)

I hope this helps!

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