

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

Lawlessness, Legalism and Sanctification

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“And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. And you know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.” (1John 3:3-5)

The hope this passage refers to is that we might be like Jesus when we see Him (1John 3:1,2). The problem to which it refers is sin. Sin mars the image of God in us and sin keeps us from being more like Jesus. The essence of sin is lawlessness (verse 4). In this issue we will discuss how getting to the root of lawlessness is the key to sanctification. We will also expose some common stumbling blocks of misunderstanding in the process.

The irony of modern America is that while we are being inundated with an ever deepening sea of burdensome laws, our society is increasingly lawless. Laws and lawlessness are multiplying simultaneously. How can this be? The answer is found through understanding the nature of lawlessness. **Lawlessness is not the absence of law, but the absence of the fear of God.** It is the failure to acknowledge God as the only supreme Lawgiver and Judge.

Laws and Lawlessness

We probably have more lawyers than any society in the history of mankind. If we consider federal, state, county, and city laws, we doubtless have the world record in numbers of laws also. The sorry story is that the types of crimes that harm society the most are on the rise. The Minneapolis Star Tribune (5/28/1995) ran a headline article that outlined the 268 new laws passed by the Minnesota legislature during its last

session. They are not all bad, but it seems to me that “new law” ought to be an oxymoron. The more time honored and stable law is, the better it serves its purpose of giving reasonable boundaries within which to live without chaos. The belief that endlessly increasing and changing laws can manipulate reality and life to solve man's problems is essentially legalism.

The Law given at Sinai provided Israel with restraint to sinful tendencies, a stable national identity, a secure environment in which people could conduct their lives, and a timeless testimony to the intervention of God in their history. Law needs consistency for it to function usefully. Joseph Sobran commented on this:

... laws are best that require least enforcement - laws that are rooted in the moral habits of the citizens, and enjoy the citizens' respect for their permanence. This kind of respect shouldn't be presumed upon or frittered away by the imposition of a multitude of trivial laws. A law passed yesterday isn't likely to command the same assent as a law that has existed for centuries.¹

In this light, it is ironic that the Ten Commandments (several millennia old) are banned from display in public schools while an ever changing array of state dictated, “politically correct” rules are foisted upon the students.

To show how crazy this becomes, the Readers Digest ran an article called “The Death of Common Sense” that was condensed from Philip K. Howard's book. Listing many absurdities of modern law, the article states, “Our regulatory system has become an instruction manual, telling us exactly what to do and how to do it. The laws have expanded like floodwaters breaking through a dike - drowning the society we intended to protect.”² Jesus said of the Scribes and Pharisees, “*And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so*

much as a finger.” (Matthew 23:4) Those who “*seated themselves in the chair of Moses*” (Matthew 23:2) became lawgivers, not law (God's Law) abiders.

When God is not honored and His Word is not heeded, the result is not a society with a lack of laws, but just the opposite. The former communist Soviet Union was officially atheist, yet had an extremely strict system of law. They had the death penalty for dozens of offenses and strictly regulated the lives of their citizens. In their case, lawlessness and legalism comfortably co-existed. Lawlessness and legalism seem to go together. The antichrist is called, “the lawless one” (2Thessalonians 2:8). Does this mean that under his system, there will be no laws? Revelation 13:17 shows that buying and selling will be strictly regulated. Lawless autocrats throughout history, from the pagan Roman Emperors to Adolf Hitler, have introduced strict laws regulating their subjects.

At Issue: Who is King?

Though law in general and God's Law in particular have several important functions, the first and primary purpose of God's law is to establish the sovereign right of the Creator to the honor and obedience of the created. The first law was the one given to Adam and Eve in the Garden. It did not regulate **how** they went about doing the legitimate things they had to do. They “freely” ate of the other trees, named the animals, communed with God and one another, and tilled and kept the garden. The command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil forbade them to cross the line between the lawgiver and law abiders. They were not to decide for themselves what is permitted or forbidden. Rebellion against that law challenged the Word of God (Genesis 3:1), the uniqueness of God (Genesis 3:5), and the penal justice of God (Genesis 3:4). Is God the rightful Lawgiver who will be true to His Word and sure in His

judgement? The Serpent said, “no.”

1John 3:4 says, “*Sin is lawlessness.*” This means a willful rejection of God’s sovereign rulership. The spirit of lawlessness that characterizes the end of the age (**Matthew 24:12**) is a pervasive refusal to acknowledge God for who He is. It is setting up the creature in the place of the Creator. The creature as the ultimate “king” turns out to be a more prolific lawgiver than God Himself. God gave only one law to the first humans. After the Fall, God gave the Law to His people at Sinai. The rabbis found 613 laws in the Torah. The ten commandments serve as a key summary of God’s law. Even at that, all of the law can be summarized by the greatest commandments, to love God and one’s neighbor (**Matthew 22:37-40**).

While the love of God and neighbor is clearly becoming less prevalent in our modern society, the Federal Register of new and proposed regulations, is now over 68,000 pages.³ All the while the cry is, “you cannot legislate morality.” Webster’s New World

Dictionary defines morality: “. . . rightness or wrongness, as of an action . . . the character of being in accord with the principles or standards of right conduct.”⁴ Does not all

legislation in some way define for us what is or is not “right conduct”? The 55 mile per hour speed limit tells us that it is right to drive 55 and wrong to drive 70. Behind this law is the idea that human lives can be saved and suffering can be lessened if people obey the speed limit. This clearly has a moral connotation.

A commonly seen bumper sticker reads, “keep your laws off of my body.” To modern pagans, laws are all right; in fact 68,000 pages of “new” laws can be tolerated every year, as long as none of those laws restrain man’s evil nature. As long as abortion, homosexuality, adultery, etc. are left alone, more laws are great. The Biblical idea of law is thereby turned on its head.

But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who

are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted. (1Timothy 1:8-11).

Laws against the behavior Paul mentions as requiring restraint through law, are either being liberated, or failing to be strictly enforced in our modern society. Laws about cracks in sidewalks are strictly enforced.

According to **Romans 1:21-32**, this happens when men refuse to honor God, though they know He exists. God allowed Adam and Eve liberty to conduct their lives using reasonable discretion; but He did not allow them to cross the line between the Creator and the created. Now that the line has been crossed and

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the whole creation subjected to sin and futility, the opposite condition exists. While the line between the Creator and created is being erased, endless regulations restrain the liberty to live one’s life with common sense. Lawlessness and legalism are the unhappy results.

“*For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved*” (**2Peter 2:18,19**). Peter rebukes the false teachers for liberating immorality and calling it “freedom.” Submission to God and His Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the only thing that strikes at the root of lawlessness. True freedom begins when the Son sets us free (**John 8:36**). We are either free to serve

God in love or “free” to pursue slavery to moral corruption. Sanctification does not happen until we resolve this matter.

Christian Citizens in a

The question then is how a Christian is to relate to a society that has run amuck. How do we live in relationship to rulers and rules that sometimes are at counter purposes to those of God? The Bible has answers for us since much of it was written under similar circumstances. Paul wrote Romans while living in a pagan Roman society rife with corruption and immorality. He wrote,

Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil. (Romans 13:1-4)

Christians are to be good citizens and submit to civil authorities. God established these authorities, even if they refuse to acknowledge God in their own lives. God is not limited to using only godly authorities, but sovereignly uses even pagans for His purposes and the welfare of His people.

Cyrus who was raised up to liberate the Jews from Babylonian captivity serves as an example (see **Isaiah 44:28 & Ezra 1**). Even Pharaoh served God’s purposes (**Romans 9:17**). Those who flee lawlessness and put their hope and trust in God can live as obedient citizens **because** they fear God. We are instructed to pray for those in authority (**1Timothy 2:1,2**) so that “. . . we might live a quiet life in all godliness and dignity.”

Although the early church was hated, persecuted and killed by pagan rulers, they still sought to live as good citizens. The early church father, Justin, writes in his defense of the faith to the pagan rulers about this: "And everywhere we, more readily than all men, endeavor to pay to those appointed by you the taxes both ordinary and extraordinary as we have been taught by Him . . . Whence to God alone we render worship, but in other things we gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that with your kingly power you be found to possess also sound judgment."⁵

Daniel also serves as an example of a person of faith living as a citizen of a pagan government. In **Daniel 6**, the king planned to appoint Daniel over the entire kingdom because of his "extraordinary spirit" (**Daniel 6:3**). This caused others to seek his undoing: "*then the commissioners and satraps began trying to find a ground of accusation against Daniel in regard to government affairs; but they could find no ground of accusation or evidence of corruption, inasmuch as he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption was to be found in him*" (**Daniel 6:4**). Daniel, the Jewish person of faith in a pagan kingdom that held his people captive, had been a model citizen. His enemies had to trick the king into outlawing prayer to get Daniel in trouble. When they succeeded in their evil scheme, Daniel disobeyed the government and prayed (see **Daniel 6:5-10**).

This pattern is repeated in the New Testament. Civil rulers were honored and obeyed unless what they commanded contradicted the purpose of God. When the apostles were told that they could not teach in the name of Jesus, they disobeyed: "*But Peter and the apostles answered and said, 'We must obey God rather than men.'*" (**Acts 5:29**) When Christians of the first three centuries were commanded to curse Christ, burn incense to the gods, and "swear by the genius of Caesar," they refused. Many died as martyrs. Throughout history, when pagan, megalomaniac rulers demanded to be worshipped and obeyed as gods, Christians refused and worshipped God alone.

The same principle applies to us. We should pray for the governing authorities,

righteous or unrighteous. We should submit to civil laws. Like Daniel, we should be found to be good citizens should any accusation rise against us. We should pay our taxes. However, we must always worship only the triune God of the Bible and we must disobey when commanded to do what God clearly forbids or commanded not to do what God clearly commands. Thankfully, that situation has not arisen often for Christians in America; but we are not immune to persecution. Paul did not go on a crusade to overthrow the government of his time, neither should we. Paul exercised the rights that went with Roman citizenship (see **Acts 22**), so may we in the countries in which we live, only doing so with wisdom and discretion from God.

The lawlessness surrounding the Christian should make him uncomfortable. Peter wrote about Lot's situation: "*for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day with their lawless deeds*"

(**2Peter 2:8**). There is danger that our agapē love could grow cold because of the lawlessness of the end times: "*And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold*" (**Matthew 24:12**). The only way to persevere until the Lord returns is to go by faith from our previous lawless condition to sanctification - "*For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.*" (**Romans 6:19**)

Lawlessness and Legalism

Lawlessness and legalism are often misunderstood because lawlessness is seen as a **lack** of laws and legalism as the **presence** of too many laws. Neither term has to do with how many rules people live under. Lawlessness is a condition of being, a state of one's moral and spiritual condition. Biblically, lawlessness is the refusal to acknowledge and submit to God's sovereign right of rulership. It is like those in Jesus' parable who

said to the rightful son, "*we will not have this man reign over us*" (**Luke 19:14**). Rejecting God and His word leaves man without absolute moral guidance. This deprivation is not one of laws, but of inspired, truthful, godly law that is always for our good. In the place of God and His Word man sets himself up as lawgiver. The result is often an abundance of laws that seek to manipulate and regulate life in foolish and burdensome ways.

Legalism is not the presence of law or laws, but is a religious philosophy - it is an "ism." It is the belief that a system of law or laws can justify or sanctify a person before God. Theoretically, a legalist could hold to very few laws and a lawless person a multitude of laws. For example, in Galatians where Paul writes against legalism, he forcefully rejects any teachers who claim that one must be circumcised to be a Christian (see **Galatians 5:2-4**). Theoretically, a person could have only one law (e.g. that all Christian males must be circumcised or

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they will be expelled from Christian fellowship and have their salvation questioned) and be a legalist.

Lawlessness and legalism go quite well together because both are a rejection of God and his Word. Legalism refuses to acknowledge that man's condition is so hopelessly depraved that only God's sovereign action of love and mercy can save him. It refuses to believe that man is justified by faith alone. It is an attempt to use law to cover man's spiritual "nakedness" when only the blood of Jesus will accomplish this. It is a self-righteous attempt to establish one's own right standing before God.

Paul asks the Galatians rhetorically, "*This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*" (**Galatians 3:2,3**) We are regenerate because of the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, not because

we successfully followed any system of law that caused us to merit God's favor. One must believe the Gospel to be saved, and this belief entails a complete hope and trust in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and His resurrection and a renunciation of all hope in self or man. **Galatians 3** shows that sanctification is also by faith. We are no more sanctified by works of the law than we are justified by them. We begin by faith and walk by faith.

The **obedience** of faith is not legalism. It is the living out of a life of faith guided by God's word and empowered by God's Spirit. The obedience of faith is always worked out in a spirit of humility and dependence upon God. That God's Word provides absolute moral guidance does not make the person of faith a legalist for depending upon it for such guidance. Conversely, the legalist may only reference Biblical law and none other, yet be guilty of legalism based on how and why he looks to God's law. If the legalist thinks that he can either justify or sanctify himself on the basis of comparing himself to others and more completely following God's law, such a person is gravely mistaken. Pride is evidence that one is falling short of God's commandment.

At issue is this: do we trust God or man for salvation and sanctification? It is not an issue of the Old Testament versus the New Testament. The whole Bible teaches salvation by faith. Paul used the story of Abraham in Genesis and the fact that, "*Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness*" (**Romans 4:3b**) before he was circumcised to teach justification by faith.

Jeremiah wrote:

Thus says the Lord, `Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind And makes flesh his strength, And whose heart turns away from the Lord. For he will be like a bush in the desert And will not see when prosperity comes, But will live in stony wastes in the wilderness, A land of salt without inhabitant. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord And whose trust is the Lord. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, That extends its roots by a stream And will not fear when the heat comes; But its

leaves will be green, And it will not be anxious in a year of drought Nor cease to yield fruit."

(**Jeremiah 17:5-8**)

The Bible has a unified message of hope and trust in God and never indicates that human beings can save themselves through following any system of law, even Biblical law.

Whenever man becomes the ultimate lawgiver and judge, legalism is the result. "Do these things and you will be saved," is the message. History has shown that God is merciful and man merciless. Legalists who gain power over the lives of others historically have been cruel and mean-spirited in their application of law to the lives of their subjects. **Matthew 23** is an indictment of this practice. The laws of the legalists change in fickle ways, often to circumvent God's law (see **Mark 7:1-13**).

The Only Hope

Each of us must settle the issue of kingship. Is God the rightful, sovereign ruler of our lives? Will we confess Jesus as Lord and bow our knee to Him now, or wait to be forced to when it is too late? (see **Philippians 2:10**) If we will acknowledge what is - that God is the Creator and rightful law-giver, we can appeal to Him to change us into His image. Justification happens when by faith we trust Jesus' shed blood to remove our sins. This includes lawlessness, the essence of sin. This means that from now on we have no supposed right of self-rule. Whether we stumble or make great strides in our battle against sin we always acknowledge the truthfulness of God's Word.

Sanctification is progressive. It begins with justification and ends with glorification at the resurrection (see **Romans 8:28-30**). The process in between is where our present struggle lies. The process is always fraught with difficult questions about the rules. Christians during the New Testament era also dealt with ethical matters that were not always subject to simple, legislated answers (see **Romans 14** about "disputable matters"). Life is too complex for anyone to write enough laws to cover every possible situation. Yet there are clear, changeless laws and principles that guide us if we

really love the truth.

The problem is lawlessness, not the lack of clear answers about morals and ethics. In my experience, it is the camels and not the gnats that are the undoing of most people (see **Matthew 23:23,24**). Over the twenty four years that I have been a Christian, I have witnessed many who argued over every "i" that needed dotting and "t" that needed crossing; only to find out later that they were involved in gross sin. The problem is lawlessness, not the lack of a detailed enough law book. We need to submit to God as the sovereign lawgiver and depend upon Him for justification and sanctification. His Word provides us with the ethical and moral guidance we need. His Word cannot become obsolete and never needs amending.

I pray that each of us will be found changing by God's grace into the image of Christ when He returns.

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End Notes

1. Joseph Sobran, National Review, "Pensees" (December 31, 1985) p. 28.
2. Philip K. Howard, Reader's Digest, "The Death of Common Sense"; April 1995, p. 50.
3. *ibid.* 53.
4. Webster's New World Dictionary, under "morality" (New York, 1970: The World Publishing Company)
5. Justin, Apology chapter XVII.