

Obedience: Love or Legalism?

John MacArthur

A few years ago I wrote a book that became the subject of widespread controversy. That book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, argued that Jesus is presented in the gospel as Savior *and* Lord and that He demands obedience. Those who remain obstinately unwilling to obey Him are actually guilty of rejecting the Christ who is offered in the gospel. So the person who claims to accept Jesus as Savior while persisting to refuse His lordship has actually spurned the true Christ and therefore is no Christian.

That, of course, is nothing more or less than what mainstream evangelicalism has historically affirmed. Virtually all the important Protestant statements of faith say exactly the same thing. In the Westminster Shorter Catechism, for example, question 86 asks, “What is faith in Jesus Christ?” The answer: “Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, *as he is offered to us in the gospel.*” Question 87 goes on to define *repentance unto life*: “...a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth with grief and hatred of his sin turn from it unto God *with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.*”

Our obedience does not merit salvation, of course. But genuine conversion to Christ inevitably produces obedience. Therefore, **while obedience is never a condition for salvation, it is nonetheless always salvation’s fruit.** That is why Scripture speaks of obedience as an essential evidence of true Christianity: “He that saith, ‘I know him,’ and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 Jn 2:4). “In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God” (1 Jn 3:10). “He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God” (3 Jn 11).

In the midst of the controversy over these things, a fellow pastor wrote me:

“Dear John,

I am sympathetic to your stance on the lordship of Christ. You are quite right in teaching that the gospel calls sinners to repentance and calls for their obedience to Christ as Lord. His lordship is as crucial to the gospel message as His deity. In fact, as you point out, His deity and His lordship are so inextricably bound together that a Christ who is not Lord of all is not the Christ who saves. The modern notion that the sinner can reject Christ as Lord but receive Him as Savior is foreign to all the historic creeds. To my way of thinking, any message that excludes the lordship of Christ is not the gospel at all.

If you don’t mind, however, I would like to offer a criticism that I hope you will find helpful, not hurtful:

I notice that you present Christian obedience as a *duty*. You often cite the biblical passages that speak of the Christian as a bondservant—as if this meant we are abject slaves to Him. Your stress is on the Lord’s authority to command obedience. And therefore you speak of obedience as an *obligation* to which the believer is bound.

I see a different emphasis in Scripture. Faith works through love (Gal 5:6). The Christian obeys Christ out of sheer love for Him. Obedience for the Christian is not so much a duty as it is a delight. Believers obey because that is where they find their satisfaction—not because they are bound to do so. We obey out of love for Christ, not out of fear, and not out of duty.

I believe this perspective is essential to joyous Christian living. It is the whole difference between legalism and true Christianity.”

I sincerely appreciated that man’s comments. And I agree that it is possible to place so much stress on the duty of obedience that we lose sight of the joy of it. After all, the Christian’s obedience should be a delight. Love for Christ is a higher motive than fear. So there is certainly some sound truth in what this man wrote.

Nonetheless, the danger of overemphasis is very real on both sides of this truth. It is not quite right to say “We obey out of love for Christ...and not out of duty.” **Duty and love are not incompatible motives.** A father provides for his children because he loves them. Yet it is also his legal and moral duty to do so. The fact that a man loves his

children does not lessen his duty to them. The more he loves them, the more he will see the duty as a joy and not a drudgery. But even when the duty is a delight, it should not diminish the father's solemn sense of duty.

Our obedience to Christ is like that. Certainly we ought to obey Him out of a deep love for Him. And the sheer joy of pleasing Him should permeate our obedience. Yet **we should never think of obedience as anything less than a sacred duty. Our love for Christ does not make submission to Him elective.** Christ is still our Master, and our relationship with Him carries a great weight of responsibility. **We ought to serve Him as loving, devoted bondservants.** "Abject slaves" is probably not too strong a term.

Jesus Himself underscored this very thing: "But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, 'Go and sit down to meat?' And will not rather say unto him, 'Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?' Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do (Lk 17:7-10).

That imagery paints a clear picture of the kind of servitude we are expected to render to Christ as His servants. But that's only half the picture. Our Lord also called for the obedience of love: "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15). And He elevated those who obey to the level of *friends*: "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you" (Jn 15:14-15).

Obviously, **our Lord viewed our love for Him and our duty to Him as motives for obedience that are inextricably and necessarily bound together:** "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me" (Jn 14:21). "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love" (Jn 15:10).

Far from being a drudgery, Christian obedience is thus the bond of our relationship with Christ and the source of our deepest joy. And **the fact that we are obliged to submit to His lordship should never alter the joy we find in doing so.**

Of course, because we are still fleshly creatures, our obedience is not always joyful. And so we must realize that **even when our hearts are not brimming with the joy of the Lord, obedience remains our duty. We are to obey when it brings us pleasure, but we also must obey even when we do not feel like it.** Both our love for the Lord and our sense of duty to Him should motivate this obedience. One must never cancel out the other.

I fear that the church in our generation is losing sight of the role of duty in the Christian life. Multitudes see "duty" as something altogether foreign to Christianity. Compliance with the commandments of Christ is deemed optional. If you dare suggest that obedience is mandatory, you will be branded a legalist.

"We are not under the law, but under grace" is becoming the mantra of modern Christianity. But most who chant that phrase today mean something dramatically different from what the apostle Paul meant in Rom 6:14, when he wrote, "Ye are not under the law, but under grace."

The phrase "under the law" occurs at least ten times in Paul's epistles, so we know it is a crucial concept in his theology. In Gal 3:23, for example, he writes, "Before faith came, we were kept *under the law*." Now, however, he says as Christians we are "not under the law" (Gal 5:18).

I often hear Christians recite the phrase "not under the law, but under grace" as if it meant no standard of law whatsoever is ever binding on believers. Grace is seen as a grand permissiveness, contrasting with the uncompromising moral standard of the law.

One man wrote:

"According to Paul, I am not under law. That has radical practical consequences for my Christian life. It means I do not have to look over my shoulder at the law and judge my life by it. The law was a negative standard. It

was filled with prohibitions and punishments. Grace is the opposite. It is filled with positive inducements and promises. Which would you rather have as a rule of life? I live under grace, not law. And that means whenever the law brings its negative message—when it says, ‘thou shalt not’—it does not apply to me.”

The notion that no law is binding on the Christian is a classic form of antinomianism. This type of thinking sets grace *against* law, as if the two were antithetical. It has some dire theological consequences.

It is crucial to understand that **in terms of moral standards, grace does not permit what the law prohibits.** “Grace” never signifies the lowering of God’s moral demands. The word “grace” in Scripture signifies a lot of things, but licentiousness is not one of them. In fact, **those who turn the grace of God into promiscuity are expressly condemned as false teachers** (Jude 4).

“Grace” according to Scripture is the undeserved kindness of a sovereign God. More than that, grace means that God mercifully gives us the very *opposite* of what our sin merits. **Grace includes not merely pardon for our sin, but also the power to live a transformed life.** In other words, the grace Scripture describes is a dynamic force—the sovereign influence of a holy God operating in the lives of undeserving sinners. **This is the key to grace: It is God working in us to secure our working for Him** (Phil 2:13). Grace first transforms the heart and thus makes the believer wholly willing to trust and obey. Grace then conveys upon us both the desire and the strength to fulfill God’s good pleasure. Far more than mere pardon, grace also insures our obedience, gives us a true love for God, and transforms our lives in every sense. Ultimately grace totally conforms us to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29). Even now, grace is doing what the law could not do: it is fulfilling the righteous requirement of the law in us (Rom 8:3-4).

So **the moral standard set by the law does not change under grace.** Indeed, it could not; it is a reflection of God’s character. But divine **grace actually empowers us to fulfill the moral demands of the law** in a way that the law alone could never do.

Just what does the apostle Paul mean when he says we are not under law? **There are two ways Scripture clearly teaches we are not under law:**

We are not under the ceremonial law

Paul’s epistle to the Galatians uses the expression “under the law” several times (3:23; 4:4-5, 21; 5:18). Paul wrote this epistle to confront the influence of the Judaizers. They were Jewish legalists who were trying to impose the ceremonies and rituals of the Mosaic law on all Christians. According to the Judaizers, in order to become a true Christian, a Gentile first had to become a Jewish proselyte.

Circumcision and the dietary laws became the test issues. This had been a running dispute in the early church from the very beginning. The earliest church council in Jerusalem had been convened to deal with this very question. According to Ac 15:5, some Pharisees who had converted to Christianity rose up and demanded that Gentiles who joined the church be circumcised and directed to obey the law of Moses. Luke records what happened:

“The apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter. And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, ‘Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they’ (Ac 15:6-11).

The council saw a heated debate on the question. But led by James, they ultimately came to consensus: “Trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: but...write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood” (Ac 15:19-20).

This meant that the ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic law were not to be imposed upon the church. Circumcision could not be required of the Gentiles. Strict adherence to the dietary laws was not to be prescribed. But in order not to offend the Jewish brethren, the Gentiles were asked to abstain from the most offensive dietary practices: the eating of meat offered to idols, the eating of strangled animals, and the eating of blood. Even those

restrictions were not imposed as binding matters of legal necessity, but were required of the Gentiles only as a matter of charity toward their Jewish brethren.

How do we know that these prohibitions against eating certain things were not meant to be a permanent standard for the church for all time? As Paul wrote to Timothy, nothing is to be viewed as ceremonially unclean if it is received with thanksgiving (1 Tim 4:4). But these measures were called for by the Jerusalem Council in the primitive church as a matter of charity to the many Jewish believers who saw such practices as inherently pagan. The apostle Paul summed up this principle of freedom and deference in Rom 14:14-15: “I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably.”

A side note is necessary here with regard to the restriction against “fornication.” The biblical prohibitions against fornication are moral, not ceremonial, commandments. So why was it necessary to include a ban on fornication in the Jerusalem Council’s instructions? After all, fornication would clearly be deemed morally reprehensible and strictly forbidden under any standard in the early church. And from the beginning the dispute that prompted the Jerusalem Council had to do only with the ceremonial aspects of Moses’ law.

The answer lies in an understanding of the pagan religions from which many of these Gentile converts had come. The practice of ceremonial fornication was common. Many of the pagan shrines featured temple prostitutes, with whom acts of fornication were deemed religious experiences. So when they forbid “pollutions of idols, and...fornication,” the Council was prohibiting the observance of pagan religious ceremonies. And when they called for abstinence “from things strangled, and from blood,” they were asking the Gentiles to have respect for the deeply-ingrained scruples of their Jewish brethren, resulting from lifelong obedience to Mosaic ceremonies. In other words, pagan religious ceremonies were forbidden, and Jewish ceremonies were not made the standard. But charity was enjoined upon all.

It is crucial to see that this Council was explicitly not establishing the Mosaic ceremonial law—or any portion of it—as the standard for the church. The New Testament is explicit throughout that the types and ceremonies of the Law are not binding on Christians. The dietary and ceremonial requirements of Moses’ law “are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ” (Col 2:17). The priesthood and Temple worship of the Old Testament economy also “serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things” (Heb 8:5). Christ is the fulfillment of all that, and He is the Mediator of a New Covenant. To cling to the types and shadows of the Old Covenant is in effect to deny that Christ, the One foreshadowed, is superior. Therefore, the ceremonial aspects of Moses’ law have no place whatsoever in the Church.

Why did both Paul and the writer of Hebrews view the Judaizers’ doctrine as such a serious error? Because by retreating to the types and shadows of the Old Covenant, these people were guilty of replacing the all-important reality of a living Savior with outmoded symbols that only pointed to Him. Their attachment to those now-barren religious emblems necessarily thrust them into a system of works. To return to the Old Covenant was a de facto rejection of Christ in favor of obsolete types and symbols.

In one of the most unusual encounters between two apostles recorded anywhere in Scripture, Peter and Paul had a very public conflict over the question of obedience to the ceremonial law. Paul describes the confrontation in Gal 2:11-14:

“When Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?”

The issue at stake here was no longer the question of charity toward Jewish brethren but the whole doctrine of justification by faith. Apparently, even after the Jerusalem Council had rendered its decision, the Judaizers nevertheless reverted to demanding circumcision for every Gentile convert. They were actually suggesting that observance of the ceremonial law was essential for justification. And as Paul suggests, Peter, of all people, should

have known better: “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified” (Gal 2:16).

We are not under the law for justification

The centerpiece of New Testament theology is justification by faith. This is the doctrine that makes Christianity distinct. Every other religion in the world teaches some system of human merit. **Christianity alone teaches that the merit necessary for our salvation is supplied by God on our behalf.**

Justification is defined theologically as that act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous.

When God justifies a sinner, he looks at the person and says, “I accept that person as completely righteous.” It is a divine “not guilty” verdict—and more. It elevates the sinner from the condemnation he deserves to a position of divine privilege in Christ.

Justification poses a huge theological problem. Pr 17:15 says, “He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the Lord.” In other words, God Himself strictly forbids us to declare a guilty person righteous. And God says definitively in Ex 23:7, “I will not justify the wicked.”

Two obstacles exist with regard to justifying sinners. One is our sin. We accumulate guilt every time we sin, and true justice demands that every sin be punished. To let an evildoer go unpunished is by definition unjust. So **God is obligated by His own perfect standard of justice to exact a full penalty for every sin.**

The second obstacle to justification is our utter lack of merit. Not only do we accumulate guilt (or demerit) every time we sin, but we also lack the necessary merit. **Even if our slate could be completely wiped clean, all we would have would be a blank slate. But in order to be acceptable to God, we are required to have the full merit that comes with perfect obedience His law.** Forgiveness for our sin isn’t enough. We still need the merit of an absolutely perfect righteousness (Mt 5:20, 48).

From the human perspective, those would seem to be impossible obstacles to the justification of any sinner. We can certainly understand the disciples’ bewilderment when they saw these same difficulties: “Who then can be saved?” (Mt 19:25).

However, there were people in Paul’s day who thought if they could just be as good as they could possibly be, they might earn enough merit to please God. This was the attitude behind the Judaizers’ insistence on adhering to the ceremonial laws. They were trying to justify themselves before God through their own works. They were trying to earn their own righteousness. That is the very definition of “self-righteous.”

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount was an attack on that kind of thinking. He pointed to the Pharisees—legalists who kept the law more fastidiously than anyone else. By human standards they were as “good” as it is possible to be. But Jesus said their goodness is simply not good enough to earn God’s favor: “I say unto you that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20).

Jesus was teaching as plainly as possible that God will be pleased with nothing but an absolutely perfect righteousness. He taught that it is not good enough to avoid killing; we must also avoid the sin of hatred (Mt 5:22). He said if you lust in your heart, it is the same as committing adultery (Mt 5:28). He set the standard as high as possible, and then said if you don’t have a righteousness that perfect, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. **And thus He condemned us all.**

The apostle James destroyed any vestige of hope we might have for being justified by law when he wrote, “Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (Jas 2:10).

What are we supposed to conclude? That we cannot be justified by the works of the law. It is utterly impossible. The apostle Paul underscores this same truth again and again:

- Ac 13:39: “Ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.”

- Rom 3:19-20: “What things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.
- Rom 4:15: “The law worketh wrath.”
- Gal 3:10: “As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.”
- Gal 3:11: “No man is justified by the law in the sight of God.”

Paul could not state it any more clearly than that. To make the fatal mistake of thinking you can be justified by being good enough to make yourself acceptable to God is to put yourself under the condemnation of the law.

This was the heart of the problem in Galatia. People were teaching that it was necessary to obey the law in order to be justified. In chapter one Paul calls this “another gospel,” and he pronounces a solemn curse on those who were teaching it.

When Paul spoke of those who were “under the law,” he was speaking of people who thought they could be justified by obedience to the law. Two parallel expressions in Galatians make this extremely clear. One is Gal 4:21: “Tell me, *ye that desire to be under the law*, do ye not hear the law?” If they had listened to the law itself, they would have heard that it establishes impossible conditions for justification. It condemns those who fail to obey it. For sinners, the law could be a means of condemnation, but never a means of justification. For a sinner to embrace the law as a means of justification is sheer folly. Yet there were those in Galatia who “desire[d] to be under the law” (Gal 4:21).

Notice the parallel expression in Gal 5:4: “You who are seeking to be justified by law.” Those who were seeking to be “justified by law” in Gal 5:4 were the same as those who desired to be “under the law” in Gal 4:21.

Therefore, **to be “under the law” in Paul’s terminology is to be under the law as a means of justification.** It is crucial to understand the way the apostle Paul uses this expression. **When he says we are not under the law but under grace in Romans 6, he is not discarding the moral teachings of the law.** He is not lending credence to any sort of antinomian doctrine. He is not minimizing the sin of disobedience to the moral teachings of the law. He is not disparaging the law itself. In fact, in Rom 7:12, he calls the law “holy, just, and good.”

Paul’s consistent teaching with regard to the law is that it can never be a means of justification. And **when he says we are “not under law,” he means we do not ground our justification in our own personal obedience.** We are no longer trying to justify ourselves by obedience to the law. We are justified by grace through faith, not by the works of the law (Gal 2:16). And therefore we are no longer under the condemnation of the law.

How can God justify the ungodly?

How, then, can we be justified? How can God declare guilty sinners righteous without lowering or compromising His own righteous standard?

The answer lies in the work of Christ on our behalf. In Gal 4:4, the apostle states that Jesus Christ was born “under the law.” Obviously, this does not mean merely that Jesus was born Jewish. It means that He was under the law in the Pauline sense, obligated to fulfill the law perfectly as a means of justification.

In this same context, in the span of two verses, Paul twice employs the phrase “under the law.” There is a clear logical connection between the last phrase in verse four and the first phrase in verse five: Christ was “made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law.”

We’ve already said that the law cannot be a means of righteousness for sinners. But Christ was no sinner. He lived impeccably “under the law.” Heb 4:15 tells us He “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” He fulfilled the law perfectly, to the letter. 1 Pet 2:22 says He “did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth.” Heb

7:26 says He is “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.” Thus His flawless obedience to the law earned the perfect merit that is necessary to please God.

If Christ was perfectly sinless, then He did not deserve to die. As one “under the law,” He would have been subject to the curse of the law if He had violated even one command, but of course He did not—He could not, because He is God. He fulfilled every aspect of the law to the letter—to the jot and tittle.

Yet He did die. More than that, He suffered the full wrath of God on the cross. Why? Scripture tells us the guilt of our sin was imputed to Him, and Christ paid the price for it. Consequently, the merit of His perfect obedience can be imputed to our account. That is the meaning of 2 Cor 5:21: God “hath made [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”

His death takes care of our guilt, and His perfect life supplies us with all the merit we need to be acceptable to God. That is how God overcame the two great obstacles to our justification. And as Paul says in Rom 3:26, that is how God can remain just, and justify those who believe in Jesus. Christ has personally paid the penalty for their sin, and He has personally obtained a perfect righteousness on their behalf. So He can justify the ungodly (Rom 4:5).

Scripture teaches no other means of justification. This is at the core of all gospel truth. As early as Gen 15:6, Scripture teaches that Abraham was justified by an imputed righteousness. Anytime any sinner is redeemed in Scripture, it is by an imputed righteousness, not a righteousness that is somehow earned or achieved by the sinner for his own redemption.

Rom 4:6-7 says David also knew the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works. In fact, this is the whole point Paul is making in Rom 4: Justification has always been by faith, not by works, and through a righteousness that is imputed to the believer. Abraham understood the doctrine of justification that way. David knew the same truth. **So from the beginning of Scripture to the end, we are taught that the only merit God accepts is a merit that is imputed to our account.** He never pronounces us righteous because of our own works of righteousness.

On the contrary, God says all our righteousnesses are fatally flawed. They are of no more value to God than filthy rags (Is 64:6). But that is how God sees our works—no matter how good they are by human standards. They are unacceptable, filthy, to God.

That is why our obedience can never be good enough. That is why those who hang their hope of heaven on their own good works only doom themselves.

How deadly is legalism?

All of this should make it very clear that **the legalism Paul condemned as “another gospel” is a brand of legalism that seeks to ground our justification in personal obedience rather than the imputed righteousness of Christ.** How deadly is such legalism? The apostle Paul suggested it was precisely what caused the majority of Israel to reject Christ: “They being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God” (Rom 10:3). Turning aside from the perfect righteousness of Christ (which would have been imputed to them by faith), they opted instead for an imperfect righteousness of their own. They mistakenly assumed, like most people today, that the best they could do would be good enough for God.

Here is the good news of the gospel: For everyone who believes, Christ’s blood counts as payment for all our sins, and His fulfillment of the law counts as all the merit we need. Rom 10:4 therefore says, “Christ is the end [Greek *telos*, “the thing aimed at”] of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.” Christ is the fulfillment of everything the law intended. **In Christ, the ultimate goal of the law—a perfect righteousness—is made available to every believer.** His righteousness is imputed to us by faith, and that is why God accepts us in Christ and for Christ’s sake.

To the apostle Paul himself, this truth had deeply personal implications. He had labored his whole life as a legalistic Pharisee trying to establish his own righteousness by the law. He described his efforts in Phil 3:4-8:

“If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ...”

What was so important to Paul about dumping all his own righteousness? Why did he count a whole lifetime of good works as mere rubbish? Because he knew it was flawed. And he knew that in Christ he would be the recipient of a perfect righteousness. Notice verse nine: “...and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”

Any righteousness other than the imputed righteousness of Christ is mere legalism. It is incapable of saving anyone. More than that, it is an affront to God—as if we were to offer him soiled rags and expect Him to applaud us for doing so. That kind of legalism is spiritually fatal.

How Is Christian obedience different from legalism?

It has become fashionable in some circles to pin the label of “legalism” on any teaching that stresses obedience to Christ. At the beginning of this chapter I quoted someone who stated that “the whole difference between legalism and true Christianity” is sewn up in the issue of whether we view obedience as a duty.

Biblically, **there is no basis for such thinking.** The Christian is still obligated to obey God, even though we know our obedience in no sense provides grounds for our justification. That is precisely why our obedience should be motivated primarily by gratitude and love for the Lord. We are free from the threat of eternal condemnation (Rom 8:1). We are free from the law of sin and death (Rom 8:2), and empowered by God’s grace both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Phil 2:13). We have every reason to obey joyfully—and **no true Christian will ever think of obedience as something optional.**

We are not under law, but under grace. Far from being a manifesto for antinomianism or an authorization for licentious behavior, that important truth teaches us that both our justification and our obedience must properly be grounded in Christ and what He has done for us rather than in ourselves and what we do for God.

The doctrine of justification by faith therefore provides the highest, purest incentive for Christian obedience. As Paul wrote to the Romans, the mercies God displays in our justification provide all the reason we need to yield ourselves to Him as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1). Freed from the penalty of the law—loosed from the threat of condemnation for our disobedience—we are thus empowered by grace to surrender to God in a way we were powerless to do as unbelievers. And that is why **the Christian life is continually portrayed in Scripture as a life of obedience.**