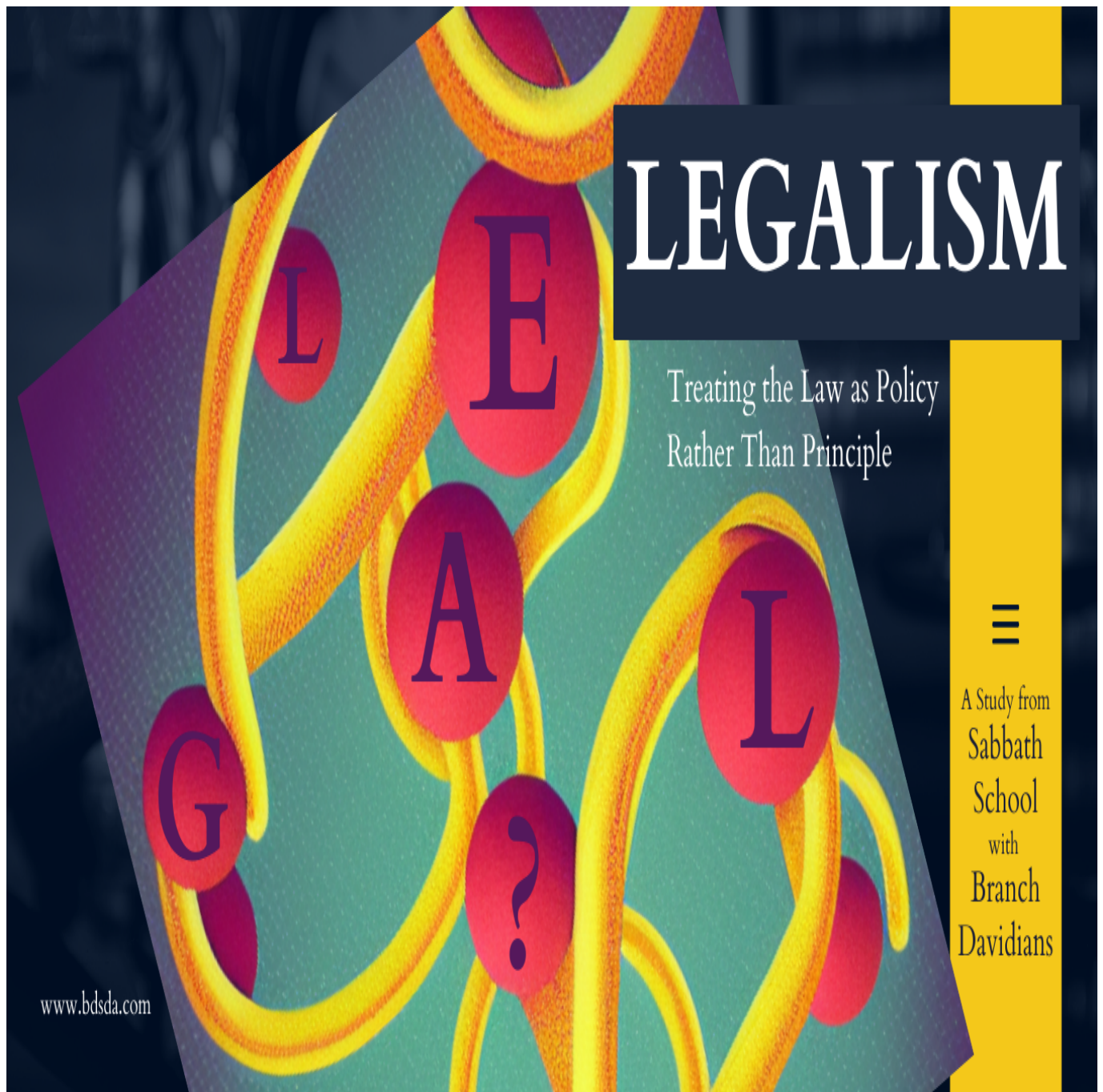


Legalism: Keeping the Law in Ceremony Rather than in Principle

**Description**

**Legalism: Treating the Law as Policy Rather Than Principle**



A study related to the SDA  
Sabbath School Lesson for 2021, 3rd Quarter  
Rest In Christ  
Week 9  
by Mary Zebrowski  
Edited by Trent Wilde

This week's lesson is entitled, "The Rhythms of Rest," and discusses all things "Sabbath" related!

One of Friday's discussion questions asks,

"How can keeping the Sabbath holy be a reminder of freedom and liberation? How can we avoid making it restrictive and legalistic?" Sabbath School Quarterly Lesson, Friday, August 27, 2021

So today, we are going to talk about "legalism." There are many definitions for "legalism" in online dictionaries, but generally, theological legalism is defined as "dependence on moral law rather than on personal religious faith." or "putting the law above the gospel."

Of course, this can be quite confusing if you are part of a denomination that promotes not only Sabbath-keeping, but the keeping of all the commandments, (Revelation 14:12). How can we promote the keeping of the Law of God and at the same time promote the gospel? Are we missing something concerning how do the two relate?

Well, second-generation SDA Pioneer A.T. Jones wrote about this quite extensively in a series of studies in Galatians, published in the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald from August 22, 1899, to November 13, 1900.

Among other things, the studies answered the question concerning whether the phrase "works of the law" in Galatians was referring to the ceremonial or the moral law.

One of the key verses in Galatians is in chapter 2 verse 16. It reads,

**16** knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

Before we go on, it would be good to mention that during the time leading up to and during the 1888 General Conference session in Minneapolis, the SDA brethren were debating which law the apostle Paul was speaking of here in Galatians 2:16, and all throughout the book of Galatians. The general thought in the church at the time was that Paul must have been speaking of the ceremonial law, since the keeping of the moral law, the ten commandments, was something the SDAs had been promoting for some years. But A.T. Jones and another second-generation pioneer, E.J. Waggoner, were teaching that the law in Galatians included the moral law. The argument that ensued over the interpretation of the law in Galatians was so intense, it totally side-railed the true message that God wanted to impart to His people – the message of "Justification by Faith."

You see, Jones and Waggoner were promoting the same thing that the Apostle Paul was – that is, that we are justified by faith and not by works of law – any law. Uriah Smith and G.I. Butler, the then Conference President, bristled at this idea. As you can imagine, not a lot was accomplished in 1888, unless you were Satan. Ellen White said,

“An unwillingness to yield up preconceived opinions, and to accept this truth, lay at the foundation of a large share of the opposition manifested at Minneapolis against the Lord’s message through Brethren [E.J.] Waggoner and [A.T.] Jones. By exciting that opposition Satan succeeded in shutting away from our people, in a great measure, the special power of the Holy Spirit that God longed to impart to them. The enemy prevented them from obtaining that efficiency which might have been theirs in carrying the truth to the world, as the apostles proclaimed it after the day of Pentecost. The light that is to lighten the whole earth with its glory was resisted, and by the action of our own brethren has been in a great degree kept away from the world.” Ellen White, 1 SM 234.6

As you can see, Ellen plainly declared that what Jones and Waggoner were teaching was a message from the Lord. She was primarily talking about what they had to say about justification. In fact, she didn’t take a side on the law in Galatians during the 1888 meetings. However, she later wrote plainly on the subject in agreement with what Jones and Waggoner taught, as we’ll see in a bit. Furthermore, Jones and Waggoner’s understanding of the law in Galatians was closely tied to their message of justification by faith. So, let’s take Ellen’s advice here and listen to what A.T. Jones had to say about this.

A.T. Jones, in his study on this, wrote,

“What law is referred to in the phrase ‘works of the law,’ which is several times used? The answer is, It is not any particular law exclusive of all other laws; it is any law at all, all laws, in the general idea of law. accordingly, the Revised Version puts in the margin each time, ‘works of law,’ and other translations render it directly ‘works of law,’ as of the idea of law in general. The Greek also sanctions this; for in each place where the expression, or a kindred one, is used, it is written without any article: ‘works of law,’ or ‘of the law,’ or ‘the law.’ The expression, then, being that of the general idea of law, that men are justified by faith of Christ and not by works of law, in the nature of the case any law and all law would be comprehended, and therefore the highest of all law—the law of God—as well as all other; that there is no justification, no righteousness, no salvation, by any law whatever, nor by the works of any law whatever; but only by the faith of Jesus Christ.” A.T. Jones, Studies in Galatians, p. 5

Jones goes on to give more evidence for this position. He points out that both the Law of God (the moral law) and the Law of Moses (the ceremonial law) are equally referred to as “the law” in Galatians.

Jones writes,

“In Galatians 5:14 it is written: ‘All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ which is unquestionably a direct reference to the law of God, while in the same chapter, and even all through the book, the question, the law, of circumcision—the law of Moses (John 7:23)—is involved.” A.T. Jones, *Studies in Galatians*, p. 5-6

Jones goes on to summarize the book of Galatians like this:

“...the object of the book of Galatians is salvation by the gospel, not by law; it is justification, righteousness, life, by faith of Christ, not by works of law. It is to show that as a means of justification, of righteousness, of salvation, any law of any kind, and all law of every kind, is absolutely excluded.” A.T. Jones, *Studies in Galatians*, p. 8

Many SDAs of today believe that the 1888 message was really about believing that because of our faith and acceptance of Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we will be saved, even if we do not perfectly keep the law of God – that God sees us as righteous even if we still harbor sin in our hearts.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

Consider this statement from E.J. Waggoner. He said,

“There are just two services. The service of Satan, which is of sin unto death, and the service of Christ, which is of obedience unto righteousness. A man cannot serve two masters. All believe that. Then it is impossible to serve sin and righteousness at the same time. Now we call ourselves Christians. That means – what? Followers of Christ! But in all our Christian experience we have left little loopholes along here and there for sin. We have never dared to come to that place where we would believe that the Christian life should be a sinless life. We have not dared to believe it or preach it. But in that case we cannot preach the law of God fully. Why not? Because we do not understand the *power* of justification by faith. Then without justification by faith it is impossible to preach the law of God to the fullest extent. Then to preach justification by faith does not detract from or lower the law of God, but is the only thing that exalts it.” E. J. Waggoner, *Waggoner on Romans*, 200.3

Waggoner here promotes the Christian life as a sinless life. He said that “without justification by faith it is impossible to preach the law of God to the fullest extent.” He said that “to preach justification by faith does not detract from or lower the law of God, but is the only thing that exalts it.”

I don’t know about you, but that is quite different from any sermon on justification by faith I have heard in our churches! So how is it that we are not justified by the works of the law, although justification by faith exalts the law?

Well, let’s now get back to A.T. Jones and his studies in Galatians for the answer.

““Since the ceremonial law, the moral law, and the general idea of law, are all involved in the argument, what then becomes of the view that has been so long held, and that seems to rest upon authority, that the ceremonial law is the chief subject as to law in the book of Galatians?” The answer is, It is true. Yet in this answer there must be borne in mind what is comprehended in the term ‘ceremonial law,’ and especially the ceremonial law involved in the book of Galatians. That it is not the ceremonial law, as expressed in sacrifices and offerings, that is particularly the subject, is evident from the fact that from the beginning to the end of the book, neither sacrifices nor offering is even once referred to. That it is the ceremonial law, as expressed in circumcision and its meaning among the ‘Pharisees which believed,’ is evident from the fact that, over and over, circumcision is mentioned. When, then, was the meaning of circumcision among the ‘Pharisees which believed’? How much did circumcision cover in that Pharisaic ceremonial system? ...

With the ‘Pharisees which believed,’ everything was ceremonial; because it was outward, of works, of the flesh, of self; everything was done, and must be done, in order to be justified by it, in order to be righteous by it, in order to be saved by it. In this way the moral law itself was made merely ceremonial—the moral law, the ceremonial law, all law, was thus reduced to one vast system of ceremonialism. And of this vast system of ceremonialism, circumcision was the very nucleus. And it is this system, and this spirit, of ceremonialism, that is combated and repudiated in the book of Galatians. And this is the ceremonial law which, over all and through all, is the great subject as to law in the book of Galatians; and which, as a false gospel, subverted souls, and perverted and opposed the true gospel.” A.T. Jones, *Studies in Galatians*, p. 9-12

Jones showed that the issue with keeping the law, any law, is keeping it only in a ceremonial, or outward way. This is the point Jesus made in His Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said that it’s not just about “not killing,” but about “not hating.” In other words, someone could pretty easily keep the 6th commandment in a merely ceremonial way by not physically, outwardly, killing anyone, but inwardly, they could be harboring hate for many people. The outward works of law, any law, will not bring salvation, only the gospel will, and that is because, the gospel is about God changing our hearts and our minds, where all sin originates. The true gospel gets to the root of sin – it gives the solution to the sin problem. It is thinking in a sinful way – a way contrary to truth – that blocks us from keeping the law of God.

The law faithfully instructs us to what is righteousness and what is sin. It is our schoolmaster. Ellen White said,

“I am asked concerning the law in Galatians. What law is the schoolmaster to bring us to Christ? I answer: Both the ceremonial and the moral code of ten commandments.” Ellen White, 1 SM 233.1

This, by the way, is one of the places where Ellen White voices her agreement with Jones and Waggoner's interpretation of the law in Galatians. So, how does it make sense for law in Galatians to be both the ceremonial and the moral law? The fact is, neither law can save. We can't be justified simply trying to carry out the letter or any law, no matter how good that law is. But this doesn't mean law is bad. Law is actually good, we can learn a lot from law. But as students of the law, we need to understand the law teaches us deep principles. If we approach it seeking to understand those principles, we will get to the heart of the matter and the law won't just be a form to us. Too often, people make the mistake of approaching the law as merely a formal policy and they thus take the letter of the law and divorce it from its principle. This is how we end up with ceremonialism. This brings us back to the discussion question in Friday's lesson, "How can we keep the Sabbath from being restrictive and legalistic?" Well, if we just take the letter of the law as a policy, we will end up keeping the Sabbath only as an empty form. The law says not to work on the Sabbath, but if we approach it legalistically, we might get caught up in technicalities and find ourselves thinking things like, "Well, this technically isn't 'work' so it is probably fine to do on Sabbath." Notice, to be legalistic doesn't necessarily mean that you are strict with your observance, it might mean that you are actually not strict at all – to be legalistic is just to try to refrain from technically violating the letter of the law, instead of focusing on the purpose of the law and how to keep it to the fullest. To keep the law spiritually, or according to principle, means that we should seek to understand the purpose of the law and attempt to embody that purpose to the fullest extent. So, when we read that we are supposed to not work on the Sabbath, we should try to learn why, and when we find out that part of the reason is that we should be occupying our time with God's business rather than our own, then we should joyously seek to use our Sabbath hours cooperating with God to accomplish His mission. And on an even deeper level, when we realize that our ways are sinful, but that God's ways are not like our ways – they are righteous – we can recognize that the Sabbath teaches us the necessity of ceasing from our own works – which are not righteous, and instead occupy ourselves with God's works – which are righteous. When we approach the law like this, it leads us to Christ, who is able to keep us from falling into sin. Instead, by keeping his words abiding in our hearts, he can keep us abiding by the law, not as a form, but as a set of principles that describe a character of pure love and truth.

If you are still struggling with sin in your heart, may we suggest starting with a study entitled, "[The Lost Gospel of Christ](#)," by [Trent Wilde](#).