

Rightly Applying God's Law Makes Legalism Impossible

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Abstract

Legalism is, at its core, a wrong theology of the law. It is rooted in the conviction that God's commands can be fundamentally kept with disciplined and earnest effort. A robust and practical theology of the law completely undermines this false faith. It shows how the law is spiritual (about the heart, not just behavior), comprehensive (addressing every similar situation), and perfect (requiring active love, not just avoiding harm). Grasping this makes Pharisaic piety impossible. God's law is so demanding that only perfect holiness satisfies it, and the law shows how far we are from this holiness. Understanding this severs the root of legalistic pride and wonderfully drives us to the cross.

Keywords

Legalism, Pharisees, God's law, works-righteousness, heart, sanctification, gospel, love, biblical counseling

I. Legalism Misunderstands God's Law

I have wrestled with the topic of legalism for over forty years and found it particularly difficult to understand—even to define. The subject is exceptionally important, yet rarely studied carefully or attacked biblically. Even how we use (or do not use) the word *legalism* is hardly precise. We would be wise to examine the topic thoroughly. Like most theological issues, it dramatically shapes real life and, therefore, counseling. This article summarizes two chapters on fighting legalism from my upcoming book.

One good way to define legalism is with respect to God's law: legalism is a wrong *theology of the law*. This is evident in the term the Lord himself uses instead of legalism: Pharisaism. Pharisaism gets the law wrong. It sees it as

1. requiring right behavior (Mark 7:6; Luke 18:11);
2. promising God's blessing and acceptance to those who do what it says (Matt 23:25–28; Mark 7:1–23; Gal 3:10–12); and
3. consisting of obligations we must fulfill (Matt 12:2; 19:3).

Note that none of these convictions is heretical in itself in the way wrong theologies are. They seldom proclaim barefaced falsehoods. Instead, they overemphasize a subordinate point, reverse the relationship between two truths, or subtly redefine important terms.

Point 2 is what we usually associate with legalism: God accepts us when we do what is right. Biblical teachers usually counter this by showing how God's grace and Christ's obedience justifies us.

Point 3 is important, but it usually flies under the radar. Legalists see God's law primarily as a requirement, not a blessing. In their view, man is made for the law, not the law for man. The truth is the opposite, and wonderful: "Oh how I love your law!" (Ps 119:97 ESV).

This article addresses point 1: seeing God's law as requiring the right *behavior*. This lie can be effectively countered by a threefold biblical truth. The law is *spiritual*, *comprehensive*, and *perfect*.

In explaining each term, I lean on the excellent material in the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC).¹

¹ *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, Modern English Version, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, epc.org/wp-content/uploads/Files/1-Who-We-Are/B-About-The-EPC/LargerCatechismModernEnglishORIGINAL.pdf.

II. *The Law Is Spiritual*

What does it mean that the law is spiritual? It means that the law is primarily about the heart. Even when it regulates behavior, its focus is on what we love, fear, trust, serve, and worship. Jesus underscores this again and again.

For example, when Pharisees ask him when the law allows divorce, Jesus uses the law to point to their hardened hearts and their wrong attitude toward marriage. God joins husband and wife, and man may not separate them. Divorce is an aberration, allowed only when absolutely necessary (cf. Matt 19:6, 9).

Notice what happens. Jesus is asked about behavior, but his answer addresses the heart: their views of marriage and divorce. His was a radically different perspective, for the disciples (not the Pharisees) say, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” The law demands we *love* our wives like the Lord loves his bride (cf. Eph 5:25). That *is* scary!

Jesus focused on the heart because he understood the law. Maybe you picture the law as mostly regulating behavior: Keep the festivals, bring offerings, eat this, do not eat that, plant and harvest this way, be ceremonially clean. That is not true! In hundreds of verses, the Lord expects to be served with gladness, trusted, feared, hoped in, and loved. God speaks to the heart throughout the law.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. (Deut 6:4–6)

This heart focus is central to *every* law.

1. *The Law Is Fundamentally Not about Behavior*

The Pharisees saw the law as regulating *behavior*. So they followed it in their conduct. They were moral, diligent, dedicated, conservative believers. But they did not grasp that the law’s focus was their heart-loves, not their behavior. By trying to follow it *outwardly*, they missed its real focus: *inward* need.

To the legalist, outwardly following the law is “obedience.” This is not true. It could be hypocrisy! Hypocritical behavior looks good, but it is not obedience. Obeying the law means following it from the heart. Good fruit is only real when the tree (the heart) is good. Pharisaic fruit does seem good. But if we look closely, we can see that it is just tacked on.² The heart is not right.

² See Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing,

This truth determines Jesus’s perspective. Because the law’s focus is the heart, hypocritical “obedience” is *not* keeping the law. Note his pointed use of “lawless” to describe the legalist:

You are like whitewashed tombs ... outwardly [you] appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and *lawlessness*. (Matt 23:25–28, emphasis added)

2. *Me Too*

This is relevant for *us*. We too can focus on behavior and miss the heart. Yesterday I was talking with a pastor friend. We were discussing a counseling case, and it occurred to me that his approach would depend on whether he was asking questions about the person’s behavior or his attitude. So I made up an example. I asked him what he would think if a man who was caring for his elderly mother suddenly told him he was putting her in a retirement home. “Having to deal with her is a pain. Caring for her all the time cramps my life like you would not believe. I’m done with this. It is just too much hassle.” The pastor thought a minute, then said, “Hmm. Well, 1 Timothy 5:8 comes to mind: someone who does not care for his own family is ‘worse than an unbeliever.’ But maybe paying for the retirement home would be caring for her.” He thought a bit more, I asked another question or two, then he said: “If he wants to love her, it could be a good thing. But if he wants to get rid of her, that is sin.”

Did you notice the radically different answers? Initially, he focused on behavior: Is it right or wrong to put your mom in a retirement home (for whatever reason)? That perspective promotes legalism. It ignores the heart. The son’s thoughts and intentions came out in what he said, as they always do: “a pain,” “cramps my life,” “I’m done,” and “too much hassle.” These statements indicate that his motive is not to love his mother. That is a problem. And my friend was able to correct his perspective. He wisely realized he was on the wrong track. The question was not whether a retirement home was right or wrong in *every* case. It was much more important to ask about *this* case. What was in the son’s heart? Did he want to care for his mom or get rid of her? That focuses on the law as *spiritual* and is the right perspective on the law.

Incidentally, this *spiritual* perspective prevents another fruit of legalism—adding man-made rules. Man-made rules try to define exact outward

2002), 63. This will be evident in the person’s life, as with the Pharisees. Because their behavior did not come from a heart for God, they were proud, greedy, deceptive, and immoral. And their faith was false and twisted. Seen as a whole, we can and should “know them by their fruits.” But an individual fruit can look good and be bad. This is precisely what makes it hypocrisy.

conformity. They do not help the heart be more loving. They are unattractive and distracting if we aim to obey the law spiritually.

3. *The Seventh Commandment*

Here is another example: “You shall not commit adultery.” Obeying this law means more than not misbehaving! Morality is fundamentally a heart matter. Behavior is secondary. Note how the Westminster Larger Catechism first describes the heart and then the behavior:

Since it is spiritual, the law involves our understanding, our will, our affections and all the other faculties of the soul [i.e., heart-attitudes], as well as our words, actions, and self-expressions [i.e., behavior]. (WLC 99)

Why is this so? “Since it is spiritual.” The law does not just regulate behavior. Thinking it does is legalistic. God’s law involves “our understanding, our will, our affections [loves, emotions, tastes] and all the other faculties of the soul.” This is why Jesus says, “Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has *already committed adultery*” (Matt 5:28, emphasis added).

Let me anticipate an objection: Does not the law also regulate actions? Yes, but actions and the heart have a certain relationship. When the law requires an action, it is primarily pointing to the heart; conversely, the heart expresses itself in actions. Not committing adultery in behavior but only “looking with lustful intent” *is* committing adultery. The Lord looks on the heart. The Bible never says that living a moral life fulfills the law. *Love* is the fulfilling of the law. That is why I am focusing on *attitudes*. Right actions are valuable only insofar as they express a right heart. Otherwise, they are hypocritical and Pharisaical—legalistic!

Therefore, Jesus is not adding to the seventh commandment in Matthew 5:28. He is explaining it. God’s focus was never behavior; it was always the heart. Like all laws, the seventh commandment requires *heart-obedience*. “All the faculties of the soul”—understanding, will, emotions, loves, tastes—should please the Lord. Everything having to do with our spirit (and that’s a lot) must completely conform to the law.

What does that mean in practice? To take one example, we *perceive* blood brothers and sisters differently from how we perceive eligible singles. We do not flirt with them or fantasize about them. Learning a similar family-type perception is part of keeping the seventh commandment. Seeing the person in front of us as an object of our desires is already breaking the seventh commandment (among others!). For this dehumanizes them. Learning to see a *person*, with feelings, troubles, and needs, is a big step forward.

When I was a pastor, I took a series of photos of advertising billboards and made a collage after cropping each one down to just the person's face. Seeing the face without suggestive poses and clothing unmasks this dehumanization. It trains us to see the person, not an object. I was particularly struck by the facial expressions. They were not faces you would like to come home to. In fact, most of them were ugly, despite the model's natural beauty. The person had been turned into a product. It was remarkable how many seemed sad, angry, afraid, or cold. If you looked carefully, you wanted to reach out to them.

Seeing the person before us as someone to love, serve, and win for Christ is incompatible with seeing them as sexual objects. Seeing fellow believers as brothers and sisters is also contrary to this lustful perspective. If we learn to perceive this way, we will have won much of the battle for purity. A selfish, pleasure-seeking heart dehumanizes and sexualizes others. This quenches biblical love and stokes the fires of lust.

Or take another example: Men have a God-given responsibility to protect women, not just from physical injury, but from spiritual and emotional harm. This is important, as many trends in Western culture make women especially vulnerable: our preference for short, shallow, and hedonistic relationships, the impact of feminism on both men and women, men's hesitation to commit to marriage, and changing morals about dating, intimacy, marriage, and divorce. If a man embraces his biblical responsibility to protect the women in his life emotionally and spiritually—and I did a poor job as a young man—he will enjoy a significant advantage in his battle for purity.

The law is spiritual. Its focus is the heart's thoughts and intentions. God's attention is riveted on "all the faculties of the soul." Note how the Catechism reflects this emphasis:

The seventh commandment requires us to be sexually pure in body, *mind, inclinations, words, and actions* ... we are to *live temperately*, keeping pure company ... and *resisting any temptation* to say, *think*, or do *anything* indecent or obscene. The commandment forbids ... *all unnatural desires; all impure imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and inclinations.* (WLC 138–39)

4. This Truth Sets Free from Legalism

This biblical emphasis on the heart's perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and desires is absolutely necessary for the battle against legalism. Only a spiritual law drives us—all of us—to Christ. Here's an excellent example from one of my students. He preached to his youth group on the subject of waiting until marriage:

I began the sermon with a story from my childhood: I liked to pick raisins out of the Christmas fruitcake, though my mother had told me not to. This should draw an initial parallel to the topic.

In the second part of the message, I showed how God gives Adam a companion, Eve, in Genesis 2. I described the origin of marriage and the sexual relationship: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

Man and woman become one flesh even if they do not marry. This is the problem when sexuality is not lived out according to God’s plan. I then cited 1 Corinthians 6:16: “Do you not know that whoever attaches himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For the Scripture says, The two shall be one flesh.” Sex is not in itself a sin before God, except when it occurs in pre- or extramarital relations. When a man and a woman have intercourse, they are automatically bound together and become one.

I explained how God wants to protect us from this by describing the spiritual and psychological wounds that such a sexual relationship can cause. These wounds demonstrate that living out sexuality this way is not God’s idea.

In the last part of the sermon I shared my own negative experience. With my testimony, I confirmed and reinforced my statements and exhorted the young audience to wait with sex until marriage. Only then can sex be right in God’s eyes. Mental and spiritual wounds can be avoided and sexuality can be enjoyed to the fullest.

If this sermon had been preached in your church’s youth group, would you be happy with it? It has central and obvious strengths: clarity, humility, and honesty. Here is my friend’s initial evaluation:

I still remember preparing this sermon and wanting to teach good, healthy values to the youth. It was my first sermon after taking homiletics. I was excited about the topic and the opportunity to apply what I had learned and show what I could do.

The audience’s reaction was positive; our youth pastor, in particular, was enthusiastic about my clear and radical message. I was convinced that I had preached the best sermon of my young career.

Looking back, the student had a different perspective:

However, something else turned out to be true. The content of my sermon did not fulfill the conditions of biblical and Christ-centered interpretation. I fell into the trap of moralism. There were already problems in my intentions during preparation. My sermon was not about the gospel, but only about good ethical and moralistic principles. It was about legalism.

My message did not end with the gospel. I preached only moralism and legalism. I clearly said how to behave in the sexual area, but without giving any help from the gospel.

This is useful self-criticism. The preacher is absolutely right. He missed the gospel. And it started with missing sin—failing to understand the law. In his

sermon, “sin” was bad behavior: having sex before marriage. The heart attitudes addressed in the seventh commandment were totally ignored. Defining “sin” this way divides the group into “good kids” and “bad kids.” The “good kids” have not had sex; the “bad kids” have. This is not, however, what God’s law does. It convicts us all. Only Christ has been righteous, and our only hope is in his obedience and his sacrifice. If the preacher had understood God’s law as spiritual—as about the heart—he would not have fallen into Pharisaism. He would have preached the gospel.³

Unfortunately, this moralistic perspective is common. The student was unusual only in his refreshingly accurate self-critique. For example, what guidelines for physical affection should unmarried couples adhere to?

If we fail to see the law spiritually, our aim will be that they not “go too far” *physically*. If we see the law as spiritual, our goal will be the complete opposite, to help them not “go too far” in their *desires*. I hope you can see how radically different that is! Rather than helping ensure that nothing happens in their behavior, we want nothing to happen in their desires. We might ask, “Tell me about your thoughts, passions, desires, and temptations in the following contexts: at a restaurant, watching a movie, taking a walk, visiting friends, and in your apartment.” It could easily be true that watching a movie and being in the apartment together triggers imaginations and temptations that do not arise at restaurants or with friends. Let us do our best, then, to keep the seventh commandment by fighting for heart purity, including how and where to spend time together. If God’s law demands sexual purity “in body, mind, inclinations, words, and actions,” we need to find out how each person ticks and what strengthens temptation for him and for her. Biblically speaking, the main goal is clear. It is not to keep their behavior pure. That is just the result. It is to keep their desires pure.

This counsel is not radical, and it is not particularly wise. Actually, it is fairly rudimentary. It is not complicated, or controversial; it is obvious. Yet I am afraid it is rare. We are, unfortunately, all die-hard Pharisees in our old natures. We need God’s word again and again to bring us back to the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

5. *The Sixth Commandment*

Jesus also applied this heart emphasis to “You shall not murder”:

³ Ed Clowney’s diagram in *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* is very helpful (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 32. It is just one of many good resources highlighting the danger of moralistic interpretation. The Bible always points to Christ and the cross.

I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. (Matt 5:21–22)

Jesus is not adding to this commandment either. Anger and contempt are forbidden in the law. The sixth commandment summarizes sins of this type. What is “this type”? Christ mentions anger, contempt, and insulting, but he is clearly not listing all sins that could lead to murder. Instead, he is giving examples. Anger is one heart attitude behind killing, but there are others—like hatred. In fact, anything that undermines love violates the sixth commandment.

Let us go one step deeper. “You shall not murder” includes suicide. Both others’ lives and ours belong to the Lord. But think about this. If anger or hatred endangers others’ lives, what attitudes endanger our own? We all endanger our lives in many, many ways: by not taking care of our bodies, worrying, being angry or stressed, driving too fast, and being reckless. Most of these dangers stem less from anger-type affections than from pleasure-seeking or carelessness. But the result is the same.

Therefore, the Catechism wisely explains,

The sixth commandment forbids ... sinful anger, hatred, envy, or desire for revenge; all excessive emotions and distracting anxieties; intemperate eating, drinking, working, or recreations; provoking words, oppression, quarreling, striking, wounding, and whatever else tends to the destruction of the life of any. (WLC 136)

This perspective is critically important to our combat against legalism! If we fail to understand the law like this, we will always think, “At least I’m not as bad as *them*.” If we rightly understand the law, however, it does what the Lord appointed it to do: discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12) and condemns us *all*.

The law, then, is the thunderbolt of God by which he hurls to the ground both manifest sinners and hypocrites, and suffers no one to be in the right, but drives them all together to terror and despair. This is the hammer, as Jeremiah says, 23:29: “Is not my word like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?”

This, then, is what it means to begin true repentance; and here man must hear such a sentence as this: “You are all of no account, you are manifest sinners. ... Here no one is righteous.”⁴

⁴ Martin Luther, *The Smalcald Articles*, 1537, Third Part, III. Of Repentance, trans. F. Benter and W. H. T. Dau, <https://reformed.org/documents/smalcald.html>.

Failing to see the law as spiritual is not a minor matter because Pharisaism is not a minor problem. It is a matter of eternal life and death. Left to themselves, our legalistic hearts will always reduce the law to behaviors that can be kept with earnest effort and self-discipline. And this opposes the life-giving gospel! We need the accurate mirror of God's law—a sharp law that convicts us not just of bad behavior but of what is really wrong with us: our hearts. We need the thunderbolt and hammer Luther spoke of. And God has given them to us in the law's being *spiritual*. This truth is one of the best ways to fight legalism. A law that convicts us all of our heart's wickedness makes legalism impossible. Pharisaism cannot survive in an environment of radical conviction of sin.

6. *Because the Law Is Love, It Is Comprehensive and Perfect*

In every matter regulated by the law, God's aim is that our hearts, and not just our actions, please him. We are to love each other, not just act as if we did!

The whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
(Gal 5:14)

There are two consequences of the law requiring *love* for God and neighbors; they are our next two points. We have to grasp both to understand the law rightly:

- 1) *The law is comprehensive* because love is comprehensive. A loving heart will obey the Lord, not only in the situation addressed in a particular law but in every similar situation.
- 2) *The law is perfect*. It goes beyond forbidding evil. It commands good. Loving is more than just not harming. It is actively caring.

III. *The Law Is Comprehensive*

When we say the law is comprehensive, we mean that its precepts always address similar situations. For example, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain" (Deut 25:4). This law contains three elements:

- 1) Do not muzzle
- 2) An ox
- 3) While it is threshing.

The law's comprehensive nature means that each element illustrates the principle, or spirit of the law. Let us start with the animal involved:

2) An ox.

Obviously, this means horses, donkeys, mules, camels, dzos, yaks, buffalo, dogs, and any other animal that might be used to thresh. The law says "ox" because that is the animal that was usually used. If your slave is threshing, you cannot argue that it is OK to forbid him from eating because he is not an ox! In fact, God's logic is "more so for humans."

2) An ox → any animal or human worker

The same logic applies to the third element:

3) While it is threshing

"Threshing" is a symbol of all kinds of similar work. Could someone argue, "It is not threshing!" and muzzle an animal driving a harvester or grinding grain? Of course not. The principle includes all work that gives access to a natural reward. If a shepherd takes your sheep into the mountains, this law allows him to drink the milk! If someone helps harvest your grapes, they can eat as many as they like. Paul spells this out in 1 Corinthians 9:7, and he is arguing from the principle, not quoting the law: "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?"

3) Threshing → harvesting, winnowing, grinding, tending or any similar work

What makes the work "similar"? Again, the principle. An ox that threshed did not just get to eat hay when he was done. Unlike plowing or hauling, threshing included a perk—yummy, ripe grain right in front of his nose. Harvesting, threshing, and grinding offer the same. This natural benefit is the issue. The law is not saying you have to fit your animal with a feed bag while it plows. God wants those tasks *he* made naturally beneficial to be handled this way. If you are tending cows, you can milk them. If you are harvesting fruit, it is there to be enjoyed. If you are harvesting potatoes, on the other hand, you will want to wait for dinner.

- 1) Do not muzzle → Give access to those benefits God made part of the work.

Let us summarize how we proceeded. Each element of the law was translated into the principle it embodies. The “ox” is any animal or human worker. “Threshing” is work with a natural reward or benefit (including getting paid, 1 Cor 9:11). “Muzzling” blocks access to this reward. These principles apply to all similar situations, especially for human workers and especially for spiritual work.

This is always how we should interpret God’s law: unpack the principles implied in the regulation and apply them to analogous situations. The law is *comprehensive*:

The prohibitions against specific sins and the commandments to observe specific obligations are typical [“types” = symbols, parallels, patterns, principles] and so cover not just those particular sins or obligations but *all others of the same kind*. They similarly include *all the contributory causes*, means, opportunities, and appearances related to these sins and obligations. (WLC 99)

Interpreting God’s law as comprehensive showcases its justice, goodness, and wisdom! If we miss this, many statutes will seem only interesting relics of a bygone agrarian age. God’s law is so much more!

IV. Digging Deeper: The Fifth Commandment

Understood comprehensively, even harvesting laws reveal God’s love and wisdom. How much more will the Ten Commandments! For example, “honor your father and your mother” has four elements:

- 1) Honor
- 2) Your father and mother
- 3) That your days may be long
- 4) In the promised land.

As mentioned above, each element should be understood comprehensively. Each is an example or an illustration. So “honor” refers to everything similar:

Those over us deserve respect in our hearts, our words, and our actions. We must pray and give thanks for them, emulate their virtues and gifts, willingly heed and

obey their lawful commands and advice, submit to their correction, be faithful to them, and defend and support their persons and authority, as is appropriate to their rank and position. We must also tolerate their imperfections and infirmities and cover them with our love, so that we will be an honor to them and to their authority. (WLC127)

- 1) Honor → respect, prayer, thanks, emulation, willing obedience, faithfulness, support, covering their sins

If this is what honor is, how well did you (or do you) honor your parents? I learned much of this only as an adult—and every point still convicts me. God's law sets a high standard!

The standard gets higher when we examine the second element:

- 2) Your father and mother

This also includes “all others of the same kind”:

Father and mother refer not just to our parents but to everyone who is older or more gifted than we are, and especially those whom God has ordained to be over us in positions of authority, whether in family, church, or civil government. (WLC 124)

[By using] the terms father and mother ... those under them are encouraged to accept their authority more willingly and cheerfully, as if they were their parents. (WLC 125)

Think about this! The fifth commandment refers not only to parents but also to older or more gifted siblings, fellow students, coworkers, believers, and especially those responsible for us: spiritual and political leaders. With that in mind, review what honoring them means: praying for them, giving thanks for them, emulating their virtues, willingly following their commands and advice, accepting correction, being faithful to them, defending and supporting them, tolerating their imperfections, and covering them with love. How well do you do that with your pastors, elders, music leaders, youth workers, small-group leaders, children's ministry workers, and others in positions of spiritual responsibility? How well do you do this with those older or more gifted? How many of these attitudes characterize the way you see political leaders or civil servants? To my shame as a former pastor, I have rarely heard someone admonish the church to “tolerate their imperfections and infirmities and cover them in love.”

When the Lord convicts us, it means we are starting to understand his perfect law.

- 2) Father and mother → pastors, elders, leaders, government authorities, those older, more gifted

This comprehensive perspective is important for fighting legalism. Legalism lives from a standard that some people meet and others do not. The legalist is then either a proud Pharisee who thinks he is keeping the law and looks down on others or a fearful and downcast Pharisee who knows he has not kept the law “well enough.” But a law that spells out “honor” and “parents” so comprehensively hews down all the proud and lofty oaks of our arrogance and puts us in the dust (Isa 2:11–17). The law, rightly applied, lays us so low that there is no hope that we will adequately keep it. And that makes it nearly impossible to be a legalist. Instead, it reveals our acute need for the One who will both bear our deserved punishment and fulfill the law on our behalf. It makes us desperate for Jesus. And desperate for Jesus is where we need to be.

Part of the wonder of God’s law is that every piece, including its promises, includes “all others of the same kind.” God’s blessings are comprehensive, too.

- 3) That your days may be long

Long life is also “typical”—it stands for all God’s covenant blessings. There are many: “That it may go well with you” and “that you may multiply greatly” in “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut 6:3), with “great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things” (6:10–11). And the Lord will eliminate your enemies too (6:19). Because the promise is comprehensive, Paul is right to add (!), “That it may go well with you” to the promised “that your days may be long” in Ephesians 6:3.

- 3) That your days may be long → go well, be blessed; prosperity, victory, peace, and more.

God also expands the place for this promise. The original commandment promised long life *in Canaan*. This is fulfilled in the whole *earth*, and ultimately in eternity.

- 4) Blessing in the promised land → in the earth

This comprehensive understanding is why Jesus expands “The meek shall inherit the *land*” (Ps 37:11) to “The meek shall inherit the *earth*” (Matt 5:5)

and why Paul says that Abraham would inherit not just Canaan but “the world [*kosmos*]” (Rom 4:13). It is why the patriarchs’ waiting for a “land of promise” (Heb 11:9) was acknowledging “that they were strangers and exiles *on the earth* (!)” (v. 13). The homeland they longed for was “a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” (vv. 14–16). Even the Bible’s land promises are Yes and Amen in Christ—and thus Yes and Amen for those in him!

Understanding God’s law as *comprehensive* heightens its requirements and its blessings; it underscores our sin and emphasizes grace. Both protect us from legalism.

V. The Law Is Perfect: It Forbids Evil and Commands Good

Because the law is love, it is also *perfect*. It does not just forbid evil; instead, it requires holy love for God and neighbors. The Bible emphasizes this again and again:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom 13:8–10)

This is an astounding claim, because on the surface there is a huge difference between “Do not mistreat your ornery neighbor” and “Love him.” The four commandments Paul cites are each negative; they tell us *not to wrong* our neighbor (do not commit adultery, murder, steal, or covet). Even if we understand the law spiritually so that it includes wrong attitudes—not being lustful, jealous, angry, greedy, coldhearted, or proud—that is still not love. *Loving* someone means caring for him, blessing him, wishing him well, and having compassion and affection for him. This love is what each law commands!

In other words, *negatively formulated laws require positive actions and attitudes*. This is a central principle for interpreting God’s law. Because God’s law is perfect, it includes every aspect of what it regulates, positive and negative. When God criticizes Joseph’s brothers for hating him (Gen 37:4–8), he does not mean they should have been indifferent toward him. No! They should have loved him.

This is true of every precept, blessing and curse:

When something is required, the opposite is forbidden, and where a specific sin is forbidden, its opposite is required. In the same way, when a requirement of the law

adds a promise of some blessing for obeying it, that promise also includes a threat for disobeying it, and when a threat is added, an opposite promise is included. (WLC 99)

This makes God’s law amazing! It means that the more we unpack it, the more we hear God saying, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). For example, the muzzling law, if read literally, just forbids *muzzling* an *ox* while it is *threshing*. However, if we interpret the law rightly, we see it has other attributes:

- 1) *Spiritual*: it includes heart attitudes. “Do not muzzle your ox” implies “do not be cruel.” “A righteous man has regard for the life of his animal, but even the compassion of the wicked is cruel.” (Prov 12:10)
- 2) *Comprehensive*: it includes all animals and people who work in similar ways. We are not to be harsh or unfeeling toward any.
- 3) *Perfect—that is, both negative and positive*: we are not just to *avoid abusing* animals and people; we must be *kind*, considerate and sympathetic. “A righteous man *has regard* for the life of his animal” (Prov 12:10a). And even more so toward employees. We should pity them (Lev 25:43) and be generous (Deut 15:14) and compassionate (2 Chr 28:15). Indeed, we should love them and not just treat them well.

Do you see how wise this is? The more we expound this law that talks about oxen on farms, the closer it gets to “Love your neighbor as yourself!” Because the law is spiritual and comprehensive, and because each precept implies every aspect of God’s perspective on its subject, it really does teach his perfect law of love. This is also why breaking it at one point is breaking it at every point. When we break a law, we fail to love. And when we fail to love, we break every law. So James puts these topics together:

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. (Jas 2:8–10)

God’s law is amazing! It is perfect! It is beautiful! It is fascinating, wise, fair, and righteous, like he is.

Let us revisit the sixth commandment and complete its expectations by considering the law’s perfection.

1. *The Sixth Commandment*

Remember that the law’s being *spiritual* means that “You shall not murder”

forbids all attitudes related to taking a life, whether someone else's (anger, hatred, envy, revenge) or our own (pleasure seeking, self-hatred, recklessness). Its being *comprehensive* means it includes everything similar and their contributory causes (any related actions or thoughts that endanger someone or promote evil attitudes).

The law's *perfection*—that it commands love rather than just forbids evil—means that actively *promoting* life and health is part of the sixth commandment:

The sixth commandment requires us to do our best to make every lawful effort to preserve our own life and the lives of others. ... In the pursuit of that goal, we must defend others from violence, patiently endure afflictions from God's hand, have a quiet mind and a cheerful spirit, practice temperance in the way we eat, drink, take medications, sleep, work, and play. We should also harbor charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, and kindness. Our speech and behavior should be peaceful, mild, and courteous. We should be tolerant of others, be ready to be reconciled, patiently put up with and forgive injuries against us, and return good for evil. (WLC 135)

Amazing. God's perspective opens our eyes to see how "You shall not murder" includes these fruits of love. Wow! And the better I understand the law's perfection, the clearer I see how guilty I really am and how much the Lord has forgiven me. That is good! We want to welcome the Spirit's conviction and be driven to Christ all the more.

2. Rightly Interpreting the Law Lets Us See Growth

There is another vital advantage to understanding the law as spiritual, comprehensive, and perfect: viewing it this way opens our eyes to a great encouragement. We can see how we are growing.

This might seem completely counterintuitive. What? The law convicts me all over! It destroys my so-called righteousness! Yes, it does. But at the same time, because the law has a perfect standard, it lets us see that we are not as guilty as we used to be.

A friend of mine, Will, told me the following story: Before he was saved, Will was a drug addict and violent. Then God gave him new life. He spent his first months as a Christian being disciplined at a Bible-believing drug and alcohol rehab center. One day, a colleague tricked Will into putting himself in a defenseless position and twisted his arm painfully. "I'll get him," he thought. So he snuck a stapler off the desk and put a staple in the other guy's arm. The guy promptly tattled on him, and he was disciplined. But that was not what bothered him. He was upset at himself. He went to his room to pray, "Lord, what's wrong with me? Am I no better?" Then he saw it—yes, he did take revenge and repay evil with evil, but he was *also* different.

In the past, a stapler would not have been his weapon of choice!

That is a great illustration of sanctification. We do not put off unrighteousness all at once. We still fall into bad behavior and evil attitudes. Will was angry and vengeful. Yet he was not nearly as angry as in the past, his vengeful thoughts were milder, and he quickly repented. Should he have been encouraged? Yes! God had transformed him.

A legalistic understanding of the law does not allow us to see this. Because it focuses on behavior, you're either 100% guilty or 100% OK. If Will thought God's law required what the rehab center required—no fighting—he'd be guilty, period. And if he could restrain himself from hitting back the next time, he'd be good, period. Even if he was boiling inside.

This is always legalism's perspective. "Just say no to desserts and chips." If you can do so, you are OK. If not, you are guilty. "Just stop doing pornography." If you can, you are OK. If not, you are guilty. Pharisaism ignores the heart. "Just behave."

God's law, because it is spiritual, comprehensive, and perfect, has a totally different perspective. The real issue is what is going on inside. How did Will do in responding to the other man's provocation? Very well! Yes, he struck back. But look at his heart. He was much less angry than in the past. He hated having taken vengeance. He cried out to the Lord. He repented. He was not upset at getting disciplined; he knew he deserved it. His deepest desire was to have the Lord change him. He was discouraged because he could not see it. Well done!

If we understand this, we will ask the right questions of someone who is consuming pornography or overeating or angry at their children or has just overspent their budget on a nonessential item (again) or is treating co-workers in an unloving way. We will aim at the heart. How bad do they think their behavior was? How well can they identify the fleshly passions driving it? To what extent are they learning to hate what they used to love and enjoy?

Summary

The better we understand God's law, the easier it becomes to avoid legalism. Seeing it as spiritual, comprehensive, and perfect makes it impossible to view it Pharisaically. The more we unpack the incredible perfection God's law demands of our hearts, the more ridiculous it becomes to think we have obeyed! And this honest self-assessment severs the root of legalistic pride and wonderfully drives us to the cross.