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The Distortion of Lawlessness

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

In addition to legalism, the Church has always faced the problem of antinomianism in its various manifestations. There are always those who view the grace of God as a license to sin. In this lecture, Dr. Sproul explains the nature of antinomianism, its various forms, and the reasons why it is deadly to the Christian life.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to define the basic concept of antinomianism.
2. To be able to outline some of the many forms of antinomianism.

QUOTATIONS

I do not say that sin works for good to an impenitent person. No, it works for his damnation, but it works for good to them that love God. . . . I know you will not draw a wrong conclusion from this, either to make light of sin, or to make bold with sin.

— Thomas Watson

Because God maketh use of thy sins, art thou excused? Is not thine evil evil, because He picketh good out of it? Deceive not thyself therein.

— John King

LECTURE OUTLINE

- I. Introduction
 - A. The word “antinomianism” is derived from two words, which when combined mean “anti-law-ism.”
 - B. Just as there are different types of legalism, there are also different types of antinomianism.

II. The First Type of Antinomianism—Libertinism

- A. “Libertinism” has a specific meaning in theology as opposed to its more general definition.
- B. The libertine says that the redeemed Christian is free from the law in the sense that he does not have to be concerned about obedience to commandments.
- C. For the libertine, redemption is viewed as a license to sin.
- D. 1 Peter 2:16 teaches us that we understand true liberty only when we are in bondage to Christ.

III. The Second Type of Antinomianism—Gnostic Spiritualism

- A. Gnosticism was one of the earliest heresies to invade the church.
- B. The Gnostics borrowed their name from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means “knowledge.”
- C. The Gnostics believed they had access to special forms of knowledge and special insight into divine truth.
- D. They would claim exemptions from the duties set forth by Christ on the basis of a higher knowledge to which they alone had access.
- E. The Gnostic spirit is alive and well today.
- F. We often hear people say, “The Spirit led me to do this,” when they are doing things that clearly violate the revealed principles and precepts of the Word of God.

IV. The Third Type of Antinomianism—Situation Ethics

- A. The book *Situation Ethics* by Joseph Fletcher has had sweeping impact on our culture.
- B. Fletcher is critical of the tendency of people to make snap judgments and give simplistic answers to very difficult ethical questions.
- C. He also claims to be very aware of the dangers of both legalism and antinomianism, but he unwittingly falls into antinomianism himself.
- D. Fletcher defines “situationism” as a third approach, between legalism and antinomianism.
- E. According to Fletcher, “The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and of his heritage and treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems.”
- F. The situationist, however, is prepared in any situation to set those maxims aside if love seems better served by doing so.
- G. The situationist goes part of the way with scriptural law by accepting revelation as the source of the norm, while rejecting all revealed norms or laws except for the one command to love God and one’s neighbor.
- H. There is only one moral absolute for the situationist—the law of love.
- I. The problem is that the situationist says we are to do what “seems” to be demanded by the law of love, but it is the Bible that actually defines for us what love demands.
- J. If love is defined by what seems right to us in any given situation, then our personal life situations become the ultimate norm rather than the Word of God, which tells us what love demands.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The _____ says that the redeemed Christian is free from the law in the sense that he does not have to be concerned about obedience to commandments.
 - a. Legalist
 - b. Libertine
 - c. Situationist
 - d. Gnostic

2. The _____ believed they had access to special forms of knowledge and special insight into divine truth.
 - a. Gnostics
 - b. Situationists
 - c. Libertines
 - d. Legalists

3. The _____ goes part of the way with scriptural law by accepting revelation as the source of the norm, while rejecting all revealed norms or laws except for the one command to love God and one's neighbor.
 - a. Legalist
 - b. Gnostic
 - c. Situationist
 - d. Libertine

4. The book *Situation Ethics* by _____ has had sweeping impact on our culture.
 - a. Peter Berger
 - b. Joseph Fletcher
 - c. John Yoder
 - d. Abraham Kuyper

BIBLE STUDY

1. What hypothetical question does Paul raise in Romans 6:1? How does Paul respond to this question?

2. What do the following passages say about those who practice lawlessness?
 - a. 1 Corinthians 6:9–11
 - b. Galatians 5:19–21
 - c. Ephesians 5:5

3. What does 1 John 2:3 say about those who know God?

4. How is showing love defined in 1 John 5:2–3?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The antinomian thinks his actions express freedom when, in fact, they demonstrate slavery to sin. Why is bondage to Christ the only way to achieve true and lasting freedom?
2. How would you counsel someone who claimed that the Holy Spirit was leading him to do something clearly forbidden in Scripture?
3. Explain the basic thesis of situation ethics. What is the fundamental problem with this ethical theory?
4. How do certain revivalistic practices, such as altar calls, promote antinomian tendencies among Christians? How does the definition of “faith” implicit in such practices contribute to the problem?

APPLICATION

1. Would any of the types of antinomianism discussed in this lesson accurately define your own position? If so, meditate on the Scriptures discussed above, asking for God’s grace to run the race with perseverance.
2. Study 1 John in some detail. Note how often John ties love of God and neighbor to particular actions and attitudes. List some of the verses that would be particularly helpful for someone facing the temptation of antinomianism to meditate on.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Mead, Matthew. *The Almost Christian Discovered*
Shepard, Thomas. *Parable of the Ten Virgins*