

Introduction to Christian Ethics
Course Developed by Ron Habinski for

Unit #8 Key Apostolic Ethical Themes
8B The Problem of Antinomianism

- The next apostolic theme we are going to examine is the **Problem of Antinomianism**.

The Problem of Antinomianism [WRITE WORD ON BOARD]

Q: Can someone please help us get started on this subject by explaining the meaning of the word, antinomianism?

A: The component parts of this word indicate that it refers to a point of view that is against or rejects any sort of law (Greek: *nomos*) whatsoever and the sort of lawless behaviour that flows naturally from such a point of view.

- You could call antinomianism lawlessness.
- It does not mean quite the same thing as lawlessness, or criminality or immorality, because the people illegal or criminal behaviours may agree that there are standard of good behaviour and legality that good people ought to follow even though lawbreaking people choose not to do so.
- *Antinomianism goes further than disobeying laws, it denies that there are any laws or standards of behaviour that ought to be obeyed.*

- You might say that it involves a denial that there are laws and standards that the conscience ought to recognize as valid and remind us to follow.
- Antinomianism has a lot in common with anarchism, because anarchism promotes and encourages rebellion against established laws or customs.

Q: Have you come up against people who deny that there are any binding moral laws that people ought to accept and practice?

A: [DISCUSS]

- Jesus said little about antinomianism, but there is a great deal on this subject in the rest of the New Testament.
- Like legalism, antinomianism represents an extreme.
- Antinomianism is an extreme view that goes in a direction opposite to that of legalism.
- Legalism invents and multiplies rules and laws without any good or compelling reason, insisting that they are God's will.
- While legalism treats man-made rules as God's will, antinomians says that there are no rules that Christians must follow or obey, so we can do as we please.
- In the 6th generation after Adam, Lamech bragged that he had killed a boy

for striking him (Gen 4:23).

- He bragged about it because he had done it and no-one held him to account.
- No one enforced any sort of law against murder, even though this was plainly a case of deliberate murder.
- Lamech spoke openly about what he had done, evidently because he had no sense of guilt about his actions and did not see them as making him guilty of breaking a law.
- Another early statement reminiscent of antinomianism is found in Judges 17:6: ***‘In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.’***
- At this time there was no human authority to proclaim or enforce laws or rules, and people lived without standards, acknowledging no standard but what pleased them personally.
- **Isa 5:20 [READ]** Here the prophet is speaking about people who say good things are bad and bad things are good.
- In other words, they deny the validity of ordinary, generally understood and widely accepted moral distinctions, saying that no choices or actions are any better or worse than others.
- In every age and every society there have been rebels who have rejected laws and standards and the very idea of things that are morally good or morally wrong.
- We have all heard about such people and few of us would be surprised to meet someone like that.
- But what is surprising and even shocking is that from time to time people who have claimed and seemed, at least at first, to be believers, have held and taught and practiced antinomian views.
- By their behaviour, these people have been an embarrassment to Christians and to our Lord.
- They have discredited the Christian gospel and have brought dishonour upon Jesus.
- Their claim to be believers, their radical ideas, and their presence within local Churches have been great trials to the believers among whom they have insisted on claiming a place.
- These people have claimed to know Jesus as their Saviour, but have also claimed that there are no moral rules or laws that Christians have to follow or obey.
- People of this sort may have been part of what Jesus had in mind when he warned of the coming of false prophets, and said that we would recognize them by their fruit (Mt 7:15-20).
- The teachings and behaviour of such people have been a real problem for

the Church when they have appeared among us.

- Antinomian thinking gained a following in the Church in apostolic times, and so the New Testament writers have a lot to say about it. [**READ Phil 3:17-19**].

- In part, this viewpoint may have represented a reaction against the extremes of Jewish legalism.

- These people insisted that we are no longer under the authority of the Law of Moses, a view that I believe is true to the teaching of Jesus and His apostles.

- But they went even further, saying that there are no rules, standards or laws that we must obey after we have put our faith in Jesus as Saviour.

- Such “Christian” antinomianism (and I put the word, Christian, in quote marks) had a lot in common with the ideas taught by the Greek philosophical school known as the cynics.

- The cynics despised virtually everything: riches, pleasures, arts and science.

- In the package of things that they despised and rejected they included moral standards of every sort, and they acted accordingly.

- The word, cynic, comes from a Greek word meaning, “dog”.

- The cynics behaved like wild dogs and advocated living that way.

- Christians who accepted this perspective insisted that they could do whatever they wanted *because as believers in Jesus they were no longer under any sort of moral law whatever*.

- They argued that they were like dead people, with respect to the Law, so it could not apply to them or condemn them.

- They also insisted that because they were **in Christ**, spiritually speaking, they looked clean in God’s sight whatever they might do, so they could do anything and get away with it.

- Jude speaks about such people in his letter [**READ vss. 3f, 12f, 17-19**].

- The letter of James speaks loudly and clearly against the idea that faith in Jesus can be real and yet produce no positive results in the believer’s life (James 2:17-20).

- Peter speaks about such people at length in his second letter [**READ 2 Pe 2:1-22**].

- These people spoke in high-sounding words about their freedom in Christ.

- They were fond of saying that they were not under law, but under grace.

- Their understanding was that if a person is under grace, the blood of Jesus immediately and automatically cleanses all the person’s sins, so that no kind of rule breaking has any effect on the person’s acceptability to God.

- This viewpoint has appeared every now and then in the history of the

Church.

- Paul mentions their favourite argument and answers it in **Romans [READ 6:1-5, 11-14]**

- Paul argues that if we have died with Jesus, we have died to sin and have begun a new life in which sin does not control or master us.

- The antinomians did not get the point that when we are in Christ we are new beings.

- They didn't under that grace means not only that sin can no longer condemn us, but also that it must not master or control us **[READ Rom 8:12-14]**.

- Antinomians claiming to be Christians have confused the absence of divine condemnation for our sins with the absence of moral standards that God wants us to live by.

- In Galatians, Paul teaches that the Christian has a new kind of moral liberty, but he goes on to insist that our liberty in Christ must not be misused.

- **[READ Gal 5:13-25]**

- Note verse 14.

- Paul is saying that *genuine love for others is a deterrent to sin.*

- In this passage he also identifies certain types of behaviours as sinful and the products of a sinful nature:

- Romans chapter 1 gives us another list of wicked behaviours **[READ Rom 1:21-31]**.

- **Some people may defend some of these forbidden behaviours by claiming they are consistent with the love principle.**

- **This claim has been made by homosexual couples, who see their relationship and their behaviour toward each other as loving and faithful.**

- **But according to the Scriptures such behaviours are not consistent with the love principle, as God wants us to understand it, even if some people think they are.**

- In Gal 5:18 Paul says that *those who are no longer under the law are led by the Spirit of God.*

- *His point seems to be that those who are not led by the Spirit in their behaviour are still under the authority and condemnation of the Law, whether they realize it or not.*

- In Gal 5:22f Paul refers to other types of behaviour as evidences that the Spirit of God in us is leading us and making us fruitful for God.

- **Some people condemn unconditional love and compassion for the**

morally degraded.

- They disapprove of giving to unworthy people the kindness and affection that they think should be reserved for the worthy and deserving.

- Our answer to them is that God is loving to the undeserving, and the Spirit of God who is in us approves of love and kindness and produces them in us for the unlovely, so anyone who thinks disinterested love is improper is out of harmony with God's understanding of the love principle.

- Paul also teaches that our freedom is to be used to please Jesus, not ourselves.

- There are behaviours that are sin, and doing them carries certain consequences, even for "believers".

- Paul mentions some of those consequences in **[1 Cor 11:28-30]**

- The Christian who understands these principles will not fancy that a lawless or antinomian life is acceptable to God.

- Such a life cannot be lived by someone who is in close fellowship with God.

- As followers of Jesus, we have been given very clear direction as to how to deal with antinomians.

- [READ 1 Cor 5 & DISCUSS]

- This passage makes it very clear that professing believers who live and speak this way must be given no choice about continuing to fellowship with us.

- If we accept their fellowship and teaching and deeds among us, we contribute to the evil effects of their views and actions.

- Notice that we are not required to separate ourselves from contact with wicked unbelievers the way we are from wicked people who claim to be followers of Jesus.

- The New Testament says little about rebuking or correcting unbelievers.

- We are to show them love and shine before them for our Lord.

- But our responsibility to obey our Lord calls for a different approach, when it comes to antinomians who claim to know Christ.

- In many cases, the logic of their thinking will gradually drag them further and further into sin.

- And eventually, such people will probably choose to withdraw from all fellowship with Christians.

- But that does not mean that we should continue to accept them into our fellowship until they choose to leave of their own accord.

- Accepting them is contrary to the teaching of Scripture.
- It is also against good sense, because as long as they remain among us they are in a position to mislead the naïve and vulnerable among us.
- They will also damage the effectiveness of our witness, by bringing public dishonour upon God's people and the cause of Christ.

Q: Have you any thoughts or questions about antinomianism?
[DISCUSS]