

## Legalism and License Ezekiel 3:18

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. I, 152-154, emphasis added; updated to modern American English.

### **Ezekiel 3:18**

“When I say to the wicked, You shall surely die; and you do not give him warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked *man* shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand.”

The Prophet Ezekiel is now taught how difficult and dangerous an office he has now to undertake. God had previously laid it down as a law that he should utter nothing of himself. Now He adds, that, the watchman is so set over the people that he must render an account of the diligence with which he goes through his watches. It is just as if it had been said that souls were committed to his care and fidelity, so that if they should perish he must undergo punishment before God. It is better to explain the words—if *when I say to the impious, “You shall surely die,” and you do not admonish him, and he perish, then from you will I require his blood.*

In the first place, God confirms what we saw yesterday, that it is not permitted to any mortal to condemn or absolve at his own discretion. When, therefore, God sends forth His servants, He does not resign that power, for still the supreme authority remains with Himself: because **there is one lawgiver**, as James says, who can save and destroy (James 4:12; Ezekiel 13:19).

### ***The tyranny of legalism***

And elsewhere Ezekiel reproves the false prophets, because they keep alive the souls which were dying, and slay the souls not devoted to death. For **we know that proud men always tyrannize over the conscience when they take upon themselves the prophetic name, and substitute themselves in the place of God, as their practice is in the Papacy.** For the Pope indeed pretends that he does nothing in his own proper name, but meanwhile he claims the prerogative of God, and sits in the temple as an idol, because nothing is more peculiar to God than ruling our minds with celestial doctrine; but the Papists themselves heap on their own comments, and so it comes to pass that they miserably distort and drown their own consciences even to utter destruction. They enact laws according to their pleasure, then they always add the condition, that they must be kept under pain of eternal damnation, or of mortal sin, as they say.

This place, then, must be diligently marked, where God claims to Himself alone the power and right of condemning: *if, says He, when I say to the impious.* From this we infer, that **all those are sacrilegious who bind consciences with their own laws, decrees, and enactments, enforcing one thing and forbidding another, because they take away from God what here He wishes to be assigned to Him, for it is His office alone to pronounce sentence, for Prophets are only His heralds.**

***The evil of lawlessness and those who grant a license to sin.***

Meanwhile those fanatics are to be rejected, who, under pretext of this place, wish to give license to sin, and assert there is no difference between good and evil, because it is not our duty to condemn.

For, properly speaking, we do not assume anything to ourselves when we recite what has proceeded from the mouth of God. God condemns adulterers, thieves, drunkards, murderers, enviers, slanderers, oppressors: if one inveigh against an adulterer, another a thief, a third a drunkard, shall we say that they take upon themselves more than they ought? By no means, because they do not pronounce of themselves as we have said, but **God has said it, and they are but witnesses and messengers of His sentence.**

Yet this moderation must be maintained, not to condemn any one through moroseness, since many immediately abominate whatever displeases them, and cannot be induced to use diligent inquiry. **Inquiry, therefore, should precede our sentences;** but when God has spoken, then we must follow the rule which was given to the Prophet, *if you have not admonished him, and spoken for his admonition.*

Here the character which was imposed upon Ezekiel is referred to: for the same duty does not devolve upon private individuals who do not bear the prophetic name. For we must remark that **this is not a general declaration which concerns all men at large, but it concerns a Prophet who had already been called to be a watchman:** for unless those who sustain such a burden admonish mankind, no excuse remains for them but the necessity of sending an account to God for those who are lost. And the repetition shows that this ought not to be done as a matter of course, but that Prophets ought to be anxious and even zealous in recalling sinners.

This clause was clear enough: *if you do not admonish the wicked after I have spoken:* but it is added, *and have not spoken for his admonition.* This sentence seems to be repeated in vain, but God signifies that unless the Prophet admonishes sinners, he is not absolved, because he spoke once in passing and uttered but a single word. We should remember that **sinners ought to be continually reprov'd that they may return to the right way.** And this is the tendency of Paul's doctrine to Timothy: "be ready in season and out of season" (2 Timothy 4:2). For if it had been sufficient to reprove sinners mildly, and afterwards to spare them, Paul would have been content with that courtesy, but he says, we must be ready on every occasion. The minister of the Church then must not cease to repeat these admonitions, as Paul says elsewhere to the Philippians — "I am not weary of repeating the same things to you" (Philippians 3:18). And we know what Paul professes in the Acts (Acts 20:31): I have not ceased day and night, publicly and privately, to admonish each of you. That perseverance then which Paul shows that he used is here enjoined on all the Prophets and servants of God.

He says, *to urge him to turn from his evil way.* . . . Here it may be asked, why does God touch only on one side of the teaching, and omit the chief point? For why was the law given? and why were Prophets called forth, unless to collect the people for God? Here we must exercise the obedience of faith, since we know that God regards nothing as more important than uniting miserable men in the hope of eternal life. **This is the chief end of the law and the gospel, that men being reconciled to God, may worship Him as a Father.**