

Question of the Week

Legalism

29 December 1997

by Ted Wise (twise@mediacity.com)

QUESTION:

Dear Ray Stedman,

I have been branded "legalist" by many who do not want to do the will of the Lord. Yours is about the 25+ article I have collected that claims to define the term "legalism." Yours is the 25th+ DIFFERENT definition. "If the trumpet blows an 'uncertain' sound...who shall prepare himself to battle? ...

...What makes you think that I Cor 11 [at least your interpretation] alters or in any wise diminishes the Holy Spirit's command in I Cor 14 and Timothy? Why not view how you would interpret I Cor 11 in the light of the other two passages? Do women have a teaching ministry?...

Mac

ANSWER:

Dear Mac,

Unfortunately for us and fortunately for him, Dr. Stedman will not be able to answer your letter until after his resurrection. I hope you don't mind if I answer in his place. My name is Ted Wise and I am part of the team that contributed to the establishment of Peninsula Bible Church's web site.

If we have confused you, please accept the apologies of all of us who have a hand in maintaining this site. Please understand that it is not our intention to add to your burden of 25+ definitions of legalism. You have quoted a scripture that has spoken to many a brother and sister during their struggle with legalism, "For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?" Your application of this verse is appropriate and I detect no legalism in your use of it to pull our spiritual dip stick.

In fact, I think the passage you have mentioned and the one following it, "So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air." (1 Cor 14:9), are not being taken very seriously by believers in these, as you say, "late Laodicean" times. Arguments over words and spiritual thrill seeking occupy the thoughts and actions of the majority of our fellow Christians and James' challenge to show our faith through obedient works is all but forgotten.

Another verse that comes to mind is Ezek 33:6 "But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and a sword comes and takes a person from them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require from the watchman's hand." Surely when each of us examines our own lives, we find enough evil to cry out for God to have mercy on us without worrying about the sins of the people we have failed to warn. These are heavy thoughts indeed. I think I understand your distress about how Church meetings are conducted.

Mac, I want you to know that I take your desire to be a faithful watchman most seriously. I sincerely regret

that when you have expressed your concern about what the scriptures teach about the ministry of women in the Church you are branded a legalist. To then have the term "legalist" defined in a muddy manner must indeed be frustrating. Let me see if I can shed some light on this issue without adding to your list of 25+ definitions.

I wholeheartedly agree with you that the core of anyone's care for the Church's liturgy should be a desire for worship services to conform to the criterion set forth in the Bible. I'm sure you would agree that the starting point for such a reformation of the Church is in the heart of the individual rather than in mere outward conformity to scriptural standards. Mark reports that Jesus said, "... Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. 'But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'" (Mark 7:6-7)

It follows then that we must have a genuine desire to be pleasing to God that originates in our hearts in order to honor Him through our actions. As it is written in Hebrews, "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." (Heb 11:6)

Faith in what? That He exists? That would make practically everyone a believer because there is probably no one on earth who hasn't prayed some version of, "Please God, get me out of this and I will never do it again". No, it is not simply believing in His existence that He wants; as seen in the rest of the verse, "...He is a rewarder of those who seek Him". The faith that pleases God is a faith that trusts Him enough to entrust Him. To trust Him with your very being. To trust that He won't strike you dead in your tracks. A trust like Abraham's as he took his son up the mountain in Gen 22:8, "And Abraham said, 'God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together."

What I'm saying to you, Mac, is that you need to be careful in your encouragement of your fellow Christians so that you don't make Pharisees of them. We all forget that the flesh loves to be religious; how else would you explain the existence of Pharisees. Paul said this about himself when he was one, (Phil 3:6) "as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless." That is some statement. It means that you could hold Paul's life up to the Law and find no outward sign of sin in it. Yet he ended up, in his persecution of the Church, trying to kill the very God he thought he worshiped.

So how does one encourage his brothers and sisters without stumbling them? Paul writes in Col 4:6, "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned, as it were, with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person." Maybe that's the problem. I know I can be pretty graceless towards folks and I like a lot more salt on my spiritual food than most people do. Generalities would appear counterproductive as well. Gracefully speaking in a way that is palatable to the individual rather than the masses would seem to be the way to go.

One more important thought for your consideration, When Paul was at Antioch he made a speech in the synagogue and said this about King David and what the Lord had to say about him, "...He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My heart, who will do all My will.'" (Acts 13:22). David is called a man after God's heart because he understood the intent and purposes of The Lord God. He was a man who understood the spirit of the law not just the letter.

In this same way Paul describes us Christians in 2 Cor 3:6, "...who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." That's who we are, servants of a new covenant, a people to whom the Word of God is not veiled. A people who, like David, understand the heart of our Lord and the Spirit of the Law.

In other words, we are not like the Pharisees. We seek to understand what God intends to accomplish when He speaks, as He said in Isa 55:11, "So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth. It shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it." When God said, "Let there be light", light is what he got, not lizards. So it is with every word of His in the New Testament. This is why Jesus was so confusing to the Pharisees. They lived (and died) by the letter of the law and He was the living embodiment of its spirit. He was the perfect example of a godly man. He is the stature by which we are all measured. He was Him in whom He was well pleased.

One of the best things I can say about Jesus' righteous and sinless life is that it is mine. God does not put on rose colored glasses to see me as his dearly beloved. He gave me Jesus' righteousness as a free gift. When my time to appear before Him comes and "books are opened", I know what I'm going to say to any fallen gate-blocking angel who asks, "What's a sinner like you doing here?"

I will say what I say to my accuser now, "I'm with Him, Jesus my Lord".

Where does that leave us, Mac? Well, I guess because you seem to have a burden about it, you have got to seek to understand what purpose God intends to accomplish through His Word about women and what they can and can not do in the preparation of His bride, The Church. I can help you with part of it. I know that it has nothing to do with pleasing Him. I am already pleasing to Him by virtue of Jesus' righteousness. As He said, "It is finished".

At one time in my Christian life I tried to live out the Book of Acts like it was a script for a play, but I learned that the very definition of the Biblical word "hypocrite" is, "one who answers, an actor". For awhile I was able to fool myself with the idea that doing it all exactly right was pleasing to God. But for that to be true, my life would need to be as perfect as Jesus'. Then I thought that if I sincerely did my best...but then how sincere would my sincerity have to be to be acceptable to God? Jesus was a whole lot more sincere than I could ever hope to be. It took a thorough study of Romans to set me free from "this body of death". Eventually I understood that what He wanted was not my behavior, what He wanted was me. Offering Him my "good" behavior was like offering Him a bribe and a lot like what He said about the Pharisees' man-pleasing street corner prayers.

What a dilemma. I felt if I really did completely let go, I would simply back slide right over the edge of the world. Yet I knew that was exactly what He wanted. I had found the true issue of Christian faith. If I do let go, do I fall or does He hold me up? Of course He holds me up. It just sounds too good to be true. He offers me His very own right standing with the Father and the free gift of His Holy Spirit for my dirty raggedy old righteousness. All I have to do is believe. Oh Lord help my unbelief. As good friend says, "Everything from Him and nothing from me".

In closing, let me give you a terrific point to ponder from the Gospel of Luke chapter 6 verses 1-5, "Now it came about that on a certain Sabbath He was passing through some grain fields; and His disciples were picking and eating the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. But some of the Pharisees said, "Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?"

And Jesus answering them said, "Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?"

And He was saying to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath'."

A little background. The Pharisees believed that stricter was better. The Law said that one could not harvest his grain on the Sabbath. If we could have asked them whether it was okay for a man to pick just half of it, they would have said of course not. In fact they would have said that a man can not harvest 1/2, 1/4, 1/8, or 1/32. Not even a hand full. Jesus brought up a passage they all knew about but chose to ignore.

So there it is: Why is it okay for David and Jesus' disciples to apparently break the law?

Answer that one Mac, and you will have a proper opinion about the proper behavior of women in the Church. What do you think God was intending to bring about by what He said through Paul in First Corinthians 11, 14, and in his letter to Timothy. Then no one can call you a legalist.

(Psalm 127:1) "Unless the Lord builds the house, They labor in vain who build it; Unless the Lord guards the city, The watchman keeps awake in vain..."

Mac, The apostasy is always here.

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