

# LEGALISM AND FAITH



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Reprinted with permission and without alteration  
from articles in the Christadelphian Tidings magazine  
January 1999 to December 2000  
<http://www.tidings.org>

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The CHRISTADELPHIAN  
TIDINGS of the  
Kingdom of God 1999-2000

# 1

## Introduction

The inspired writers of scripture often used the device of contrast to give definition and substance to their subject. For instance, at the very beginning, we have creation set against the contrast of "*without form, void, and wholly dark.*" Darkness gives way to light, dry land appears out of the formless water, and teeming populations fill the void. We understand the formation and population of the earth better after God also shows us its opposite, contrasting condition.

### Frequent use of contrast

So on the pattern goes. We have not just righteous Abel, but the contrast between righteous Abel and his opposite, unrighteous brother Cain. We find not just Jacob, but Jacob and Esau, the twins with opposite values. The most detailed life of the Old Testament, David, finds sharper relief because of the extensive contrast to his predecessor and nemesis, Saul.

In the natural world, we see the same contrasts at work. For example, satiety without hunger would not feel so grand. We don't understand freedom as well as those who have endured slavery or oppression. Each new day replaces the night past, and we rejoice in the contrasting light. In all of our experiences of life, when we have contrast, we have full meaning.

The grandest example of contrast in scripture sets The New Covenant, God's salvation through faith in the blood of Jesus Christ, against the background of the Old Covenant, the Law of Moses. We have that seminal declaration in the prologue of John's gospel, after he had just used darkness and light to set the stage of contrast: The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus (John 1:18). We could have just had a record of God's grace. God could have started the Bible with the gospels. But then we wouldn't really know all that God wants us to know about faith and grace, would we? So the Bible goes beyond telling us about grace. It also tells us about law; thus, we see grace clearly because of its contrasting opposite, law.

### The contrast to Jesus

Likewise, when we look at the life of Jesus our Lord, and the various possibilities God could have used to contrast His son, we notice a remarkable and utterly sobering reality. God put forth Jesus as the image of Himself, the revelation of the fullness of Deity in human form (Heb.1: 1,2). He represented the supreme picture of every virtue of God and every aspect of holiness (Col. 2:9).

And with what or whom did God contrast this magnificent life of perfection?

The "*choices*" could include pagans, licentious sinners, wicked idolaters, polytheistic Romans, atheistic, agnostic Greeks, and others. Many are the ways to be ungodly. Where do we find the divinely selected contrast that fills out the full measure of the appearance of the Son of God?

Did God use the basest of peoples, the utterly wanton Canaanite gentiles? No, they are scarcely even mentioned in the New Testament, and when they are, they seem to come out on the right end of the matter (e.g. Mt. 15:21).

Did He use the Romans, the vanguard of polytheism in Jesus' day? No, if it were not for the insistence of the Jews, the Romans would have paid no attention to him at all. The Romans, by and large, hardly knew Jesus existed or cared what he did. They're not the contrasting party.

How about the great sinners of Jesus' day, the harlots, drunkards, and materialist pleasure-seekers? We find them also wanting in the role of contrast. In fact, the New Testament records the conversion of many of them. This group often stands as the better example for yet another group of worthless individuals (Mt. 21:31).

We find that all the groups we might think the Bible could use to serve as a contrast to the Lord Jesus find little mention in this regard. Not the pagans, not the Romans, not the sinners, not the atheists. Instead, God sets forth an unlikely choice. They weren't, at least superficially, all that different from the Lord. They shared his heritage. They were monotheistic and pious. They feared God. They were the custodians of His revelation, and they were utterly devoted to keeping religious rules.

They were the Pharisees, and God despised their worship. They confronted Jesus at every station. They found fault in his teachings, in his religion, even in his miracles. They misrepresented God. They exchanged His glory for their own system of rules and rituals. They received much of Jesus' attention, yet were the least responsive to his teaching. They were the only group he would call "*hypocrites*."

We do not find the opposite of faith in atheism, materialism, idolatry, or licentiousness per se, although the Pharisees answered to these descriptions also. We find it in false religion, in manmade holiness. We find it when we see faith turned into rules, love turned into scruples, holiness turned into a masquerade, piety turned into pretense. All this happened when God's own people took His holiness and turned it into a manmade system of rules and rewards. They turned away from God, and turned away others; they turned a deaf ear to His voice, and turned out to be nothing but history's greatest example of evil in sacred vestments.

### **Legalism opposite of faith**

To put the matter simply, the opposite of faith is not unbelief, nor is the opposite of the Son of God an atheistic sinner. The Bible contrasts faith not so much with unbelief, but with misbelief, misbelief of that particular stripe which corrupts faith by establishing a facade of pseudo-holy laws and rituals in its stead. The Bible sets forth the false belief of legalism, with its charade of holiness, as the opposite to instruct us in learning faith. It is from the base of legalism that the other failings of humanism -- licentiousness, materialism and idolatry -- derive.

If we want further evidence that the study of faith begins with the study of its opposite, legalism, we will find far more, as our inquiries will reveal. For now, let us just look at the warning implied in what we see on the surface of the gospels.

As a community, we find ourselves in the exact role of those who turned adversary to Jesus. We are God's people, the custodians of His word, religious in every way. We see ourselves as holy, the New Israel. How does God see us? Have we maintained the faith of the New Covenant or slipped back into the law? We are in a blessed and serious position. We can go either way.

### What does legalism mean?

Legalism describes a fundamental approach to life and religion. It is not in itself a creed or religious doctrine; rather, it is a pervasive principle that will color one's perspective of many doctrines, including God, sin, salvation, righteousness, atonement, forgiveness, worship, and fellowship. Legalism relies on the "three R's:" Rules, Rituals, and Rewards. Remember these, and you'll remember what legalism is all about.

We do not use "legalism" pejoratively to denounce anybody or any group, within or without Christadelphia (God has done so with the Pharisees, as in Mt. 23). We do not use it to label or decry or isolate anyone. We use it in recognition of its pervasive nature, sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle. We use it to describe the human proclivity toward substituting the seen for the unseen. Rule-following can be observed, faith cannot.

Legalism wants rules, so it can follow them and earn a reward. If we are legalists, we want to know the rules, follow them, and exclude those who don't, so we can appear more righteous. We want the tangible instead of the abstract. We want to know that we have done something good. We like the concepts of doing good and avoiding external evils. We like the concreteness of a rule-and ritual-based religion. The ambiguities of developing personal faith scare us. Growth in Christ lacks definition and measurement. We want to know what we should do, but we shy away from knowing whom we should be.

### A human problem

Before we leave the Pharisees, we must make a further point that will give us another perspective on the pervasive problems of legalism. We could assume legalism is a problem of time and place long ago and far away. After all, the Pharisees' legacy is the dictionary definition of "a hypocritically self-righteous person." We might think that the Pharisees invented and perfected legalism. If we do, we think amiss.

Legalism is a human problem, not a Pharisee problem. It is bigger than Orthodox Judaism, bigger than religion. It is as big as all human institutions. It is as much a part of our humanity as our sin-prone nature. In fact, it is basic to that nature. As we will see in the next article, it has its roots in our first encounter with God. It hasn't gotten any better since. We all want just rules and rituals and rewards instead of the life-transforming experience of New Testament Christianity.

## **A matter of emphasis**

Everyone has his/her favorite Bible passages and teachings. We get unbalanced when we emphasize and overwork what the Scriptures don't. Scripture emphasizes what's important. The life of Jesus has great importance to us; God gave us four gospels, or accounts of that life. In each account, the opposite, the contrast, the antagonist is played by a group of highly religious, covenant-sharing, Bible-reading, zealous people. Their approach to religion -- substituting laws for faith -- drew Jesus' harshest condemnation. God warns us about false religion by placing these people directly opposite His son.

The gospels have dozens of examples of confrontations, parables, teachings, miracles, and warnings, all in the context of Pharisaic teaching and practice versus the "*way of life*." We cannot dismiss this universal context of gospel teaching without likewise dismissing the relevance of the words of the Master for us also. To observe the Gospel teachings in context, we must look at the legalistic tendencies inherent in each of our hearts.

We can say the same for most of Paul's writings. What is his predominant context? Law vs. faith and grace. Do we take Paul's advice as relevant and valuable to us, or is it confined to his day and time? Human nature hasn't changed. Paul's teachings and warnings likewise must surely apply to us today as we live out our faith and struggle with the ever-present urge to lapse into rules, rituals, and rewards.

## **The scope of this series**

God willing, we intend to take a long, detailed look at legalism. We will trace its history and its manifestations in the Old Testament. We will look at the underlying assumptions and principles inherent in a legalistic religious system. We will carefully examine those texts in the Gospels and Paul's letters which reveal to us how Jesus and Paul countered legalism and its nefarious consequences. We will scrutinize the legalistic mind-set, and carefully contrast it with the mind of faith. Always, we aim to expand our faith, not fall into the legalistic trap of setting ourselves up as righteous and looking askance at others. We want to use this study to know what faith isn't, so that by learning from the scripturally-emphasized device of contrast, we can increase our faith.

Lord God, we pray for your grace and guidance as we grow in Christ. Help us know, we ask in Jesus' name, to discern faith and incorporate it into in our lives.

# 2

## The Beginnings of Legalism

Perhaps the single most powerful anti-legalism passage we find in all of the New Testament comes in Paul's letter to the ecclesia at Colossae. Paul wrote that at his crucifixion Christ nailed the law to the cross; therefore, the keeping of special feast days provided no righteousness (2:14-17). Jesus rose from the dead, but the law stayed dead. Unlike the risen Christ, it could not give life to its adherents. Paul referred to confidence in the works of the law as *"empty deceit, human tradition, according to the fundamental spirits of the universe"* (v.8). He contrasted this vain show with the true substance of religion, which is Christ, for in him *"the fullness of the Deity dwells"* (v.9).

Then, in the passage where he really denounces legalism (vv.20-23), Paul writes that rules-and-rituals religion is worse than worthless, it's downright deceptive and dangerous. Unfortunately, the archaic King James Version here is barely intelligible. However, many translators and revisers have given us a variety of colorful renditions of Paul's intent. The NIV gives this straightforward account:

*Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.*

### Rules and rituals religion

Today we have the phrase, *"you can't legislate morality."* Paul says this, and much more. In the passage above, he gives us three key ideas to consider concerning the *"rules and rituals"* approach to religion.

1) *Rules don't work because they only deal with externals.* *"Things that perish with use"* refers to material items such as food and clothes. Many Mosaic restrictions classify various items as unclean or forbidden. However, sin and temptation have an internal locus -- our own thinking. Rules don't operate on our thinking; therefore, they miss the mark. A rule can regulate behavior, but not thinking. A rule can declare something clean, but a rule can't make us "think clean."

2) *Rules have an appearance of holiness.* It might seem "holy" to abide by a long list of prohibitions. But, as noted above, true holiness can never come from following rules. This makes rules dangerous. They masquerade as righteousness. They give one the facade of being holy and religious. They can even replace true faith, but never do the job right. Therefore, rules are worse than useless; they are deceptive and dangerous.

3) *Rules-based religion anteceded both the Pharisees and the Law of Moses.* Paul gives two leads here.

First Paul uses the phrase "*basic principles.*" Paul wrote, "*since we died to Christ, we died also to the basic principles of the world.*" The phrase, "*basic principles,*" sometimes translated "*rudiments of the world,*" or "*elemental spirits of the universe,*" evidently refers to a fundamental human predisposition. It occurs twice in Galatians (4:3,9 RSV) and twice here in Colossians (2:8,20). (The only other occurrences come in II Peter, describing that which will perish at the Lord's judgment when the elements burn with fire, so the phrase clearly is negative in connotation.) In both Galatians and Colossians, the context deals with the shift from law to grace. The "*basic principles*" refers to the opposite of grace, which is law.

People have always been saved by grace, whether looking forward or backward to the sacrifice of Christ. And biblical history shows that all people have also struggled with the innate tendency to live by rules which govern the external world. It is a pervasive condition. We are looking at a greater principle than that which developed in those living under the law of Moses. Paul uses the phrase "*basic principle*" to emphasize that this is a universal fundamental principle, of which the Jewish condition was but one manifestation.

The second hint that the "*basic principles*" refers to some process broader than the Jewish approach comes from the list of Paul's examples in v.21: "*Touch not, taste not, handle not*" (Col. 2:21 KJV). Other versions reverse this order, more accurately reflecting the nuances of the Greek verbs. This list refers to various Mosaic restrictions and ensuing Pharisaic additions -- that is, the "*fences*" the Pharisees built to maintain their purity. Theirs was a religion of "*don't even touch.*"

There seems to be something else, however, as "*do not touch*" is a quote from Gen. 3:3, when Eve spoke to the serpent; Paul uses the same Greek word as in the Septuagint. Eve told the serpent that they shouldn't eat of the tree, and neither should they even touch it. In looking at the circumstances of this dialogue, it seems Paul refers to the temptation of Adam and Eve as the primal account of the failure of rules-based religion, now labeled as "*the elemental spirits of the world.*"

## **Back to the garden**

Turning our attention to Genesis, we see that Paul's allusions and the details of the account of Adam and Eve's temptation show us that legalism is as old as mankind. It is our pedigree; it is a human condition. We cannot say it belongs to someone else.

As we attempt to understand the process of transgression, we understand that the first sin involved also the first temptation, and, subsequently, the first confession, and the first act of forgiveness. We want to look in detail at the process of temptation and

answer the question, "What failed in Adam and Eve's strategy for dealing with temptation?"

Most of us have, no doubt, noted that the apostle John's description of the "lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (I John 2:16 NKJV) has a striking resemblance to "good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise" (Gen. 3: 6 RSV). What went wrong so that yielding to, rather than resisting temptation, carried the day?

We start by carefully noting the words of God to Adam recorded in Genesis 2:16,17 (RSV): "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Eve had yet to appear, so we assume that her understanding of this command came from Adam. However, in the face of temptation (which came from both the perceived benefits of the fruit itself and from the serpent's deceptive questioning) Eve retorted, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but God has said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

If we compare Eve's words to what the Lord God told Adam, we will find several discrepancies, which include additions, deletions, and substitutions. For instance, she mitigates the penalty of "you will surely die" to "you will die." She reduces the beneficence of God in "you may abundantly eat" to "you may eat." These have more significance in Hebrew than in English. There are other key differences also, but we want to focus on just one for the present lesson, and that is the addition to God's law of "neither shall you touch it."

Remember, God's instruction to them forbade only eating. He made no mention of touching or not touching. Eve's reply to the serpent marks the first and only time the prohibition against touching occurs (see also 3:1, 11). Moreover, Eve gave it the reinforcing "God has said" (italicized above) -- making their addition to God's law -- "touch not" -- equal to His own decree, which was merely "eat not."

What have we here but the beginnings of Pharisaism? Our first parents failed because they thought that erecting a moralistic fence between themselves and the tree would protect them. However, the temptation to eat of the fruit had to be met by faith, not by law.

### **Adding to the law**

What does this mean? Paul understands it to mean that adding to God's law has been a human folly from the beginning. We add vainly to God's word, giving it the imprimatur of *Vox Dei* (the word of God) itself, to no avail. The result of Adam and Eve countering temptation with law, not faith, resulted in the terse, "*she took of the fruit, and did eat*." Did you notice the apparently unnecessary "*she took of the fruit*?" Of course she would have to in order to eat it. Why mention this? To highlight the sad fact that *in failing to keep God's command, Adam and Eve broke their own "addition" first!*

Just as Paul said, laws cannot constitute morality, for they don't address the real issues of faith and temptation. Adam and Eve were tempted, but they dealt with the

temptation as an external issue, that is, focusing on the fruit, rather than their own response.

Perhaps their line of thinking went this way:

*"If the fruit of that one tree is 'off limits,' then it must have some inherent 'not goodness' about it. Why else would God have declared it off limits? Something must be wrong with that tree. It is 'unclean!' And if it is 'unclean,' then by all means, even touching it would be wrong! We must not even handle the fruit, let alone eat it!"*

Hence, they added to God's law, to protect themselves from a perceived external "contamination." In fact, Eve wouldn't use its name when talking to the serpent; she referred to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as "*the tree in the midst of the garden.*"

We may feel the above line of thinking is too speculative, but that is the thought process people follow in the legalistic approach. The point is Adam and Eve certainly thought that adding to God's law would give them an extra measure of protection. They addressed the problem of temptation by adding a stricter rule that would give them another barrier against committing transgression. The result? Their strategy failed. They succumbed to the temptation, and in so doing they broke their own law as well as God's.

The failure of rules as a basis of morality has its roots in the rudiments of the world, wrote Paul. This is the example upon which he based that teaching.

The declaration in Colossians puts us in the very uncomfortable position of realizing that we cannot escape our legalistic tendencies. It has been so from the beginning. It's not a Pharisee thing, it's a human condition. And if that's how our first parents, in all their created glory, dealt with temptation, what can we say about ourselves now?

## **A beginning lesson**

We aim at present to raise our awareness of the pervasive problem of the rule-making approach to religion. In later articles we plan to look at many of the questions raised by this observation. We need to know how Paul could also call the law "*holy, just, and good.*" We need to know about the rules necessary for the maintenance of order and organization in a group endeavor, such as an ecclesia. We need to know how to set rules for our children, for whom rules are necessary and appropriate. We need to know when -- and how -- to make rules for ourselves for our own growth.

Above all, we need to take Paul seriously on this issue, and not let our worship devolve into rule-following. Paul knew what he was writing -- rules don't work. They are not a substitute for, or a supplement to, saving faith. Let us develop faith, not hide behind the facade of rules and rituals. Especially, let's not force our scruples on others with the imprimatur of "*God has said...*," when in fact He did no such thing. Our faith should lead us to a righteousness based on grace, and on the obedience out of love to the teachings of the New Covenant. The addition of laws, rules, regulations, and codes lead to the misguided sense that avoiding something brings holiness. Worse yet, rules divert our attention from the true internal problem, and emasculate our ability to deal with temptation.

# 3

## The History and Theological Context of the Law of Moses

If salvation comes through the operation of faith and grace, what justification could we find for the giving of the Law of Moses? Salvation has always been by grace, not works. Why would God add something ineffective after already establishing the efficacy of faith? What could God be teaching in giving hundreds of commands when He fully knew that the Israelites had no chance of keeping them, and, even if they did, they wouldn't gain salvation through them anyway? This article will provide some possible answers to these questions as we explore the "big picture" perspectives on the Law of Moses in its historical and theological context.

For our first lesson, we refer to the first article of this series, where we examined the Biblical use of *contrast*. God showed us law first, so that we could see grace in perspective. We know the concepts of grace and faith better for having seen the operation of law. To fully appreciate Messiah, the living manifestation of the one true omnipotent and merciful Heavenly Father, we had to first experience the dead code of written law (Heb. 1:1,2, II Cor. 3:4-9). This point -- the law as a *contrast* to the dispensation of grace -- stands as the central idea of giving the law first. We will also find other lessons in scripture, mainly from Galatians, for the giving of the Law of Moses.

### The priority of salvation through faith

First we note a critical chronological point, drilled home by Paul in both the Roman and the Galatian epistles: the New Covenant preceded the Old, effectively reversing their titular designations. Paul uses two different lines of reasoning to establish this teaching, one from within the life of Abraham, and one from the broad sweep of Israel's history. From these expositions we have full reason to call the New Covenant also the First Covenant.

In Galatians, Paul explains that faith had precedence over law because the Lord God made promises to Abraham, according to his faith, four centuries before the giving of the law. Paul refers specifically to the Lord God's ultimate promise made to Abraham in Genesis 22:17-18 (Gal. 3:8, 16-17). He states that a later addition cannot annul these promises. His citation of the 430-year span from the promise to the giving of the law seems to emphasize this immutability. It's as if Paul had written, "*Not just precedence, but precedence by more than four centuries!*" The law cannot annul the

promises (Gal. 3:15-18); therefore the operation of faith, which brought the promises, retains priority over the law.

In Romans, the argument hinges on a sequence of events within Abraham's life: God accepted Abraham's faith as righteousness (Gen. 15:6) before He gave the ordinance of circumcision (Gen. 17:10). Even in the microcosm of Abraham's life, justification by faith preceded the giving of the ritual (Rom. 4:9-12). Just as Abraham preceded Moses, Abraham's belief in God's promises preceded Abraham's ritual circumcision. Paul adroitly used both examples, ironically skewering the law on the issue of precedence, itself a point of law. With the law thus made secondary, the New Covenant of justification by faith has a dual legacy of precedence over the Old Covenant. We call it the New Covenant because it replaced the Law of Moses, but it also represented *"that which was from the beginning"* (I John 1:1).

### **Added because of transgressions**

We move on to Galatians 3:19, where Paul asks, and then answers, the very question upon which we based this article: Why then the law? *"It was added because of transgressions."* That's the answer, but just what does *"because of transgressions"* mean?

These transgressions correlate in meaning to Romans 7:13, where Paul states that the law given to Moses exposed and magnified sin, making it *"exceedingly sinful."* Paul had also made the same point just a bit earlier in Romans 5:20: *"The law entered, that the offense might abound."* It seems that the magnifying of sin would hardly serve any spiritual purpose; however, God had two lessons to teach us. In the rampant transgressions of the law, we see both our innate refractory sinfulness, and our utter inability to achieve righteousness through a set of rules and rituals.

Thus being proven both depraved and destitute, we could readily seize the magnificent offer of salvation by faith. God be thanked that He would reckon our faith as righteousness, for we can claim neither inherent goodness nor due payment of works. Therefore, the magnification of trespass, manifested by raking our sinful nature over the coals of the law, necessitates our approaching the Heavenly Father with nought but a faithful appeal for His mercy.

### **The schoolmaster**

Paul continues in Galatians, calling the law a *"schoolmaster"* (KJV) to bring us to Christ (3:24). Other translations render this word *"custodian," "trainer," "guardian,"* and so forth. The word *"schoolmaster"* may lead us to consider the law as an instructor, with its shadows and hints teaching the *"faithful Israelite"* about Messiah. Scripture, however, does not take this view. For instance, Hebrews emphasizes the *contrast*, not the *similarities*, of Christ and the Law of Moses. The idea of *"shadow"* means a very poor representation, not some sort of approximation. Certainly, Christ was a high priest who entered the sanctuary (Heb. 9:24). The point here, however, is not that the Mosaic rituals prefigured Messiah's eternal mission, but that the Mosaic rituals paled in contrast with the eternal verities.

Moreover, when the shadow precedes the reality, can one really expect to discern the reality? We all know of the children's game of making shadow figures on a wall. We

can stick our hands in front of a bright light and make animals such as a rabbit or a dog. However, if you had never seen a rabbit before, would you have even the slightest notion of a rabbit based on the shadows of two fingers suggesting ears? Only because we have already seen a real rabbit does the shadow make any sense, and even then it's still the crudest of representations. Certainly the Israelites could not discern the nature and mission of Messiah -- whom they had never seen -- from the various aspects of ritual law, any more than we could know what a rabbit is like from a hand shadow on the wall.

In our retrospection, having the entire New Covenant and the life of Messiah in mind, we can project backwards and note the various symbols, hints, and types contained in the Law of Moses. But it seems extravagant to think that the faithful of Israel, not having seen the revelation (I Pet. 1:10-12), would come to these same conclusions and thereby construct a faith in the future Messiah. What they saw was the vanity of the law, not the reality of its shadows.

How then did the law teach Israel? The word for "*schoolmaster*," at its roots, means "*child leader*." Today we have the English word "*pedagogue*" as the transliterated descendant of the Greek word. But while a pedagogue now means an educator or teacher, the ancient pedagogue was a slave put in charge of the children as a keeper and disciplinarian. "*To understand it as equivalent to 'teacher' introduces an idea entirely foreign to the passage, and throws the apostle's argument into confusion*," wrote lexicographer W. E. Vine in the *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. The term schoolmaster is a misleading translation. What Paul had in mind was not the teaching of the law, but the constraints of the law.

Paul says we were "*shut up*" under the pedagogue, meaning the law restrained us. Restraint is good for those who need it. Paul refers to our condition as *children*, for whom restraining rules are appropriate, though they're hardly a guarantee of obedience. Adults have learned to make the right choices without having been told what to do, but children need to be told. Children need a rule such as "*wash your hands before dinner*;" adults know to do this without being told.

The Law of Moses was for the newborn children of Israel when they exited Egypt via the birth canal of the Red Sea. When Israel grew up, God removed the rules and gave them Christ, so they could live by faith and do righteousness of their own volition. This, as Paul writes in Galatians 4:1-5, is all allegorical, representing the growth of faith in the individual.

### **What the faithful saw in the law**

We can speak at length on the symbolic meanings of all the details of the tabernacle, sacrifices, priestly garments and activities, and other aspects of the law. However, the accuracy of our exposition resides in our hindsight. In their own time, the faithful of Israel could not have this vision, but they would have the perspective of faith. They would see a priest all decked out in his glorious finery, and ask, "*How does this relate to faith?*" The priest's garments would no more impress them than the accoutrements of an orthodox cleric would impress us today. The faithful would see through the law, as well as into the law.

## **The big picture**

We also spend most of our time looking at expositional trees of the law, not the whole forest. We look at the trunks and the bark and the leaves and the roots with microscopic care, finding symbolic meanings and types and shadows at every detail. However, put that aside for the moment. Take a few steps back, and get the big view. Look at the whole system of law as a unit, or integrated whole. Look at the entire landscape, and see that it has all manner of ceremony and ritual. We know now what the writer of Hebrews knew and what the faithful of Old Testament times knew: rules and rituals weren't going to get you salvation.

People had to see through the whole system for their faith to operate. They had to come to the conclusion that Paul came to in Colossians 2:21-24, because faith has never changed. While the faithful Israelite couldn't look forward with any exactitude about what the law signified, he could look at the whole system and think, *"This system has to change, because it can't give righteousness. It's based on rules."*

The faithful Israelite would recognize, at one level of understanding, that this vast system of regulations and ceremonies in some way represented the Divine mind. He also knew that God was really trying to show them *"the just shall live by faith."*

## **The O.T. estimation of the law**

When the insightful and faithful Israelite, such as an Isaiah or a David or a Jeremiah, looked into the ritual law, they saw not so much the likeness of Deity, but the vanity of ritualized religion (e.g., Isa. 1:11-16, Psa. 50:9-14, Psa. 51:16,17). They saw the failure of rules to breed morality (Isa. 1:4). They saw the weakness of human flesh exposed (Jer. 7:21-26). They saw the hypocrisy of feigned obedience without moral commitment (Amos 8:4-6). They saw that ritual works lacked the power to generate the right attitude, and they saw the nation lapse into hypocritical worship. Psalm 50 especially reflects the emphasis on attitude (sacrifice of thanksgiving) as superior to the mere ritual aspects of animal sacrifice. We have in these passages clear indication of how an insightful, faithful Israelite viewed the efficacy of ritual religion. They knew that a better covenant would some day remove the shackles of the law. Jeremiah prophesied of this new covenant, written not on tablets of stone, but written on their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34).

## **The people's choice**

People have always wanted religion to go the easy way. *"Give me the rules to follow"* is much easier to embrace than, *"I commit my life to spiritual growth, self-denial, self-sacrifice, and serving others."* We would feel safer dealing with God through rules than a face-to-face confrontation. Rules and rituals are ever so much easier to deal with; hence the popularity of ritualistic religion in the world today.

We have an established principle that God gives people the desires of their hearts in order to prove them. He gave Israel King Saul at their insistence (I Kings: 8:19-22; see also Rom. 1:24 and Mt. 25:24-26). Although we have no explicit text in which people ask for a set of rules and regulations to live by, the giving of the law could imply, *"This is what you want, so I give you into the power of your own desire. Prove to me your obedience and faith by these rules."*

God gave Israel 1500 years of life under the law to demonstrate their spirituality. What did He find at the end? His original ten moral precepts and 613 commands had multiplied into thousands of regulations, but faith was nowhere to be found. He came looking for fruit in His vineyard, but He found wild grapes, and His people rejected His son (Mt. 21: 33-43). So God ended the experiment, concluding for all time that *"the righteous shall live by faith."* The veil of the temple, torn in two at the crucifixion, meant the death of the dispensation *"added because of transgressions."* Transgression had shown all of its ugliness, and then lay defeated, ironically, by its own provision, in the body of the sinless Messiah hanged on the tree.

So the Law of Moses never effectuated salvation, and has now gone extinct. Yet it lives on as a necessary part of the development of our theology of grace. It gives us the perspective of grace by showing us the opposite. It magnifies transgression, thus driving us to God's mercy. And it shows us that while rules are necessary for children, faith is for the mature.

# 4

## The Law in the Hands of the Pharisees

### *- Development of the Pharisaic Traditions*

When Moses descended Mt. Sinai with the law, he found Israel already debauching and transgressing the first two commandments. He shattered the Tablets of Law when he saw they had shattered the Law of Tablets, inauspiciously launching Israel's nefarious career under the law's jurisdiction.

#### **613 rules**

Even without the golden calf incident, however, what would Israel's future bring, now that they had already become enslaved to the bondage of law? They had asked for rules, and rules God gave them, 613 by their count. God wanted from them the fruits of righteousness and faith, but He found only the wild grapes of rampant legalism and unmitigated immorality (Isa. 5:2). The test of living by law failed horrifically.

By works of the law, flesh proved it could not justify itself.

What happened during the millennium-and-a-half of the law? How did Israel get from the debauchery of Sinai to the legalistic piety of the Pharisees? How did the Pharisees become the religious establishment of Jesus' day? Where did they originate, and how did they develop their meticulous approach to religion? How did the Pharisees handle the law, and what did they find so offensive about Jesus? We ask these questions not so much to satisfy our historical curiosity, but to provide the necessary background to understand a key feature of the gospels.

#### **The Sabbath battleground**

We have said already the Pharisees provided a contrast to Jesus the Messiah. Everything he stood for in true righteousness, as the full manifestation of the Father, they stood for in false piety and legalistic purity. Their Sabbath rituals stood at the acme -- or shall we say the nadir? -- of their worship, so Jesus honed in on this issue -- the Sabbath -- as his primary battleground for the gospel of grace.

To understand the meaning of this contest fully, we must first take a brief historical overview to reveal what motivated the Pharisees, and to understand how they operated religiously. We will look at the development of the Pharisees' religion to realize the significance of the greatest theological contest ever -- Jesus vs. the Pharisees on the Sabbath. Just as we looked at the Law itself in its historical and theoretical context in

our last article, we will now look at the Pharisees, and cast the contrasting darkness of legalism against the light of the gospel of grace.

## **A brief theological history of Israel**

Israel served God through the law for approximately fifteen hundred years. Starting at Sinai with two tablets of stone and ending in Jerusalem with the veil of the temple rent in two, the law reigned as king but never had power to save. Apart from a few brief reformations, it never ruled the spirit of Israel. But it did beget, over a period of centuries, the greatest compilation of religious minutiae the world has ever seen.

### **During the judges**

Had Israel lived ideally after God gave them the law, they would have entered the land, lived faithfully in accord with its principles, and rejoiced in God's blessings and protection. Unfortunately, we don't read anything close to that. After the priests bore the ark in Jordan's crossing and led the march around Jericho, then what? How much do we really hear about the operation of the law thereafter? Very little.

The period of the judges could have been a time of peace, faithful worship and moral development for Israel. Instead, Israel's repeated backsliding and whoring with the foreign gods brought them repeated periods of oppression. We read almost nothing about the operation, let alone the positive effects, of the law. Instead, Levitical leadership and national unity disappeared.

During the first few hundred years or so of Israel's life under the law, they had no prophetic voice. They added no sacred writings, such as from a psalmist. They had no recorded worship. The law seems to have disappeared into a closet. Only in the spiritual oasis of the Book of Ruth, whose events probably occurred in the mid-Judges period, do we read about any significant recognition and utilization of the law. The first few hundred years in the land showed startlingly little acknowledgment of the law.

### **Under the monarchy**

The law did better in the period of the monarchs. We read of a few reformations, notably those of Josiah and Hezekiah. David, Solomon, and others wrote most of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. The prophets repeatedly referred to the law in calling Israel back to the spirit of its worship. Although the overall piety of the nation remained unacceptably low, at least God's word had regained its status as a moral standard and guiding light of the faithful. The Levitical priests maintained religious leadership, and the prophets warned against mere formal worship without moral regeneration (Psa. 50:13,14; Amos 8:5,6). Through the end of the monarchy, though, we know nothing of any group of scribes or hyper-legalistic movement developing.

### **During the exile**

The Babylonian exile provided the first venues for the development of the Pharisees' direct ancestors. Separated from their land and the temple, Israel's national identity

verged on dissolution. The Bible alone defined the people, and synagogues led by learned teachers arose.

In *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim gives a good account of Jewish activities in Babylonia during and after the exile. Compelled by a duty to preserve *Torah*, its teachings and its applications, those learned in scripture began, in a formal sense, the great era of oral tradition. They added and compiled oral laws and traditions. They defined, legislated, and taught. Their academic activities bolstered their status among the people as keepers of God's law. Those who returned from Babylon (according to Edersheim's sources, only a small percentage of their population returned) brought with them interpretations, laws, methods, and traditions. Even though they would come back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, the spiritual center of Israel now had divided loyalties. The Temple and the oral traditions would eventually become the respective bases of the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

Although the Pharisees arose around the middle of the second century B.C., they would claim antecedence to Ezra, whom they would venerate as the first scribe (Ezra 7:6, 10, 21). Skilled in the law, a teacher and a leader in Israel, he created the role which Pharisees would strive to replicate for centuries to come. When Ezra and his fellow Levites read the law to the nation, they also gave the sense (Neh. 8:7-8). In the thinking of their followers, they had sanctioned the process of commentary and clarification and sanctified the process of oral tradition. First given by God to Moses, the succession of the law, according to the *Mishnah* (which is the division of the *Talmud* containing the codified oral law), then went to Joshua, the priests, and now, to the learned scribes (*Mishnah, Abot, I:1:B*). These scribes were first known as *soferim*, from *sofer*, "counter" because their punctilious methods included the very counting of the letters in the Bible. They were the custodians of the law, and to them fell the responsibility of maintaining its purity. For three hundred years, they ruled the religious life of Israel.

### **Levitical influence diminishes**

At first, all the *soferim* were of Levi. Another group of learned laymen, also skilled in the law and well versed in the oral clarifications and explanations, arose as a parallel but largely independent movement. It was this sector of lay scribes that gave direct birth to the Pharisees. Lay influence increased greatly during the time of the Seleucid Empire (the Greek-based dynasty ruling from Syria) two centuries before the birth of the Lord Jesus.

The Greeks oppressed the Jews, eventually leading to the Maccabean revolt. It was, however, this oppression that strengthened the Pharisees' position. *Hastings' Bible Dictionary*, summarizing several ancient sources, tells how many of the priestly class, especially of the aristocracy, adopted Hellenism as a means to save their positions, and even their lives. They distanced themselves from the Pharisees, who espoused both patriotic and religious zeal. The priests, rejecting the oral laws and most of the canonically accepted Bible, maintained only a tenuous theological connection to Judaism via adherence to *Torah* only. This group, of course, developed into the Sadducees. They eventually lost much of their influence with the people, and the priesthood became largely political and symbolic.

## Pharisees emerge as leaders

On the other hand, the lay *soferim*, mostly from the lay and non-aristocratic priestly classes zealously maintained national identity through religion. They grew stronger in opposing the Greek overlords, and won support from common people. They refused any accommodation, preferring the honor of martyrdom to the corruption of Hellenism. A thousand perished in a massacre when they refused to defend themselves on the Sabbath (*Josephus, Antiq. XII.6.2*). Mattathias, father of Judas Maccabee, taught that the people should defend themselves on the Sabbath, lest they perish entirely. They did so but only to protect their religious freedom, not to acquire political independence.

The *soferim* believed the survival of their national identity depended directly on their adherence to the great oral traditions. Preservation of this revered body of teaching became their *raison d'être*. The *soferim* accepted foreign hegemony as God's will. If they could but practice the traditions of their fathers, they could live contentedly. If all Israel kept the law, they believed God would raise up a Messiah who would overthrow their dominators and restore their political Kingdom.

The name "*Pharisee*" came into use about 150 years before Jesus' birth. Although scholars don't know for sure who coined the term, we do know that the name means "*separated ones*." Whether signifying their resistance against Greek ways, or placed on them derisively by the Greeks or some Jews, the name reflected a key aspect of the Pharisees' existence. Using the laws as protecting fences, they sought to separate themselves from all defilement, whatever its origin, Jewish or Greek.

The Pharisees regulated the religious climate and the people held them in much higher regard than the discredited Sadducees. They soon moved into the leadership positions of teaching, and they dominated the Sanhedrins, controlling the civil and religious judiciary. They entirely replaced the priests as the scholarly and legal interpreters of *Torah* and found favor in the eyes of people as the true defenders of the faith. Except for the political oversight of their foreign overlords, the Pharisees became the effective national rulers.

## The Pharisees' perspective

From the perspective of the Pharisees, the gravity of their conflicts with Jesus far exceeded matters of scriptural interpretation. The battle over the law meant the battle for the survival of their nation. They averred that *Torah* defined Israel, and that the oral traditions protected the written word. Therefore, they valued their laws even higher than Scripture, as evidenced by this teaching: "*An offense against the sayings of the scribes is worse than one against those of Scripture*" (from the *Talmud, Sanhedrin, xi.3*). Because they related to God as a lawgiver, they felt the highest manifestation of Godliness came in living according to law. So they made ever more laws, defining every aspect of daily life, and declared these injunctions as divinely sanctioned.

Moreover, their recent forefathers had martyred themselves to maintain their national identity. Concurrently, the priests had defaulted on their duties as teachers and upholders of the law. Only the Pharisees' vigorous adherence to the oral law separated Israel from the heathen roundabout. Thus they had an obsessive need to maintain the

traditions handed down for centuries, for to them the preservation of oral traditional law meant the preservation of the nation of Israel and of God's word. Hence spewed their vehement antagonism to the threat of the Gospel.

### **The basis of conflict**

Although the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees meant far more to the Pharisees than just theological differences, these differences alone would have engendered major strife. The principle, "*Maintain purity through adherence to the details of the oral law*" fueled their theological engines. They had enormous respect for the wise, the learned, the erudite. They prized casuistry and sophistry. Terms like "*precise definition*," "*careful scrutiny*" and "*further clarification*" frequented their expositions. They pandered to precedence, ritual, and detail. They had thousands of specific rulings defining what "*labor*" meant on the Sabbath. Practical issues, like cleansing a house of leaven before the Passover, took on sometimes absurd dimensions. For instance, they argued at length what to do if a mouse should enter a house during the Passover with crumbs of leaven on its whiskers. Yet they saw in these trivial examples the process of debate, casuistry, precedent, analogy, and derivative argumentation that defined the legal approach. Their entire approach to religion depended on human logic, not faith. Legalism exalted self, not God.

The Pharisees also exalted holy behavior, not righteous attitude. Separation from things unholy meant piety, and piety meant reward. They believed that if they avoided external evil, God would reward them now and in the life to come, because they had earned His approbation. The more separate, the more holy; thus they promulgated laws defining all the possible defilements to avoid. The more things they labeled unclean, the more laws they could follow, and the more holiness they could manufacture for themselves. However, they acknowledged not the inward reality of human sin nature. They vainly tried to swat away the mosquitoes, but they were dying of cancer.

Over against this, came the "*unschooled*" carpenter's son from Nazareth. Without any links to Jerusalem and the rabbinical academies, he had no status (Mk. 6:2-3). Who was he to preach against the teachings of generations of scribes? How dare he dismiss the oral traditions? The Pharisees saw nothing more than another false messiah and a preacher of blasphemy.

The gospel of grace defied every aspect of the Pharisees' legalism. It relied on an entirely different set of principles. Justification by grace instead of ritual holiness led the list. Above all, even above the completely different structure of religion, towered a larger issue. This issue comprised the identity of God. At the heart of our theology lies the fundamental question: Who is God?

The Pharisees envisioned God as the Supreme Lawgiver who rewarded those who kept His rules. However, this perverse perception hearkened back to Sinai when the people rejected direct communication with God as their Father and wanted only to deal with Him through the law (Deut. 5:23-27, Heb. 12:9, 18-22). The Pharisees couldn't understand Jesus because he represented God as a concerned Father who graciously forgave His faithful, but innately unholy, children. At the root of the Pharisees' problems with Jesus lay their entirely differing perception of God. Who but

God's only begotten Son would know Him truly? We will discuss this issue -- the perception of God -- as it relates to legalism and faith later in this series, if He wills.

Paul gave Israel credit for their zeal, but not for their knowledge of God (Rom. 10:2). The Pharisees had zeal exceeding all. Because they didn't know God, their zeal created a system of self-righteousness. To look at the whole picture of history, however, the legalistic morass of the Pharisees was the only outcome available.

Once the dispensation of law attained, the only outcome would be more laws. Israel made the choice for legalism at Sinai, and legalism they got to the point where they could no longer recognize God or the Son He sent to them.

# 5

## The Law in the Hands of the Pharisees

### - *Fears and Fences*

*You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.* From this simple injunction, a mere five words in Hebrew, the sages and rabbis of old derived untold hundreds of rules, clarifications, arguments and extensions. According to Adin Steinsaltz, in *The Essential Talmud*, the ban on any cooking of milk and meat together extended at least as far back as the Second Temple era. Of all the traditions of the Pharisees which the Lord Jesus assailed, this one received no mention in the Gospels, or elsewhere in the New Testament, for that matter. Nonetheless, we will use this Scriptural text and its progeny as a typical example to examine the religious approach of the Pharisees. Although some of our examples will come from more recent times, the approach has remained stable for more than two thousand years, varying only in the application of prevailing social and technological circumstances.

### The scriptural account

The quotation above appears twice in Exodus (23:19, 34:26) and again in Deuteronomy (14:21). In the last citation it occurs in the context of other dietary laws. In Exodus the contexts seem filled with a variety of unrelated issues; however, the general contexts concern warnings about adopting the practices of the various heathen nations in and around the promised land (cf. Ex. 23:23-24, 34:11-16.) Umberto Cassuto, a Jewish commentator, notes a link to the previous command about bringing the first fruits, which was also a Canaanite practice. His paraphrase would read, "*Yes, offer your first-fruits, but don't do the kid-boiling ceremony with which they accompany their offerings.*" He cites a Ugaritic inscription, "*boil a kid in milk, a lamb in butter,*" referring to a fertility ritual. The command not to boil a kid in its mother's milk was probably intended to proscribe this idolatrous Canaanite practice.

One might think that this law would not generate much attention after the Canaanites died out. Maybe when Israel first entered the land it would have some relevance, but then what? However, in the hands of the legalist sages, this prohibition took on a life that would last to the present day and govern the lives of Jews the world over. It is the basis of Kosher laws regarding the separation of milk and meat.

A study of the processes that led to this multiplication of laws and applications will give us a primer in Pharisaic methodology. The following sections will cover some key forces and issues that proliferated laws, and gave them standing as God's own word.

## Theology

Pharisaic theology concerned itself little with the issues of faith we would consider "*first principles*." The Pharisees had far more interest in obeying traditions than in probing, say, the nature of God. Because Judaism is largely a religion of following rules, a remarkably wide span of thought exists on issues of basic principles and issues of the plan and purpose of God.

*"The aim of Jewish study was not really the knowledge of God. That was too daring -- Theology was not at the heart of religion. The aim of Jewish study was not to experience God, but to know His will. The former is, after all, a pleasure, but the latter is duty and work"* (Lionel Blue, *To Heaven, with Scribes and Pharisees*).

*"In any event, the Talmud is primarily about conduct, about how a good Jew should behave in particular circumstances. The codes of Jewish law define the faithful Jew as the one who keeps the commandments. The emphasis is always on correct practice rather than correct belief"* (Lavinia and Dan Cohn-Sherbock, *A Short Introduction to Judaism*).

*"Not inquiry, but action,"* reads a dictum in the *Talmud* (*Abot*, I.17). The sages didn't spend a lot of time with issues such as the nature of God or man, as they thought these subjects had little practical application for creating rules.

To the rabbis it made little difference why God gave the prohibition about boiling a kid in its mother's milk. Their expositions wouldn't focus on spiritual lessons they could derive from the command. If the law's purpose was to keep them from idolatry, all that really mattered was that they obeyed the law in behavioral terms.

## Knowledge

The scholars and sages dominated the religious life of Israel for hundreds of years before and after the time of Jesus. Rabbinic traditions stressed all the capabilities of the mind: memory, logic, intuition, deduction, analogy, inference and so on. The sharper the mind, the more respect and reverence a rabbi commanded from his disciples. They considered knowledge the greatest attribute a human could have. They even felt obedience, which they regarded very highly, came second to knowledge. Without knowledge one wouldn't know what rules to obey. For instance, scholars who specialized in dietary law would have an apprenticeship in a slaughterhouse to learn all the particulars of kosher meat production. Steinsaltz notes that in many communities the shochet, or kosher butcher, had a status second only to the rabbi.

The rabbis considered the proliferation of rules an exercise of the mind which honed one to godliness. They didn't think of their laws as splitting hairs, they thought of them as necessary and appropriate mental exercises. As Steinsaltz observed (again quoting from *The Essential Talmud*) concerning the basic command to rest from labor on the Sabbath, "*In every age this has immediately aroused a practical question: how is this labor to be defined?*" Concerning the instruction to dwell in booths (Lev. 23:42) he wrote, "*...the student must immediately ask himself how to define booth.*" If the first thing that comes to mind is "*define,*" it's easy to see how their minds worked. It would remind us of the question "*who is my neighbor?*" posed to Jesus by the man trying to "*justify himself*" (Lk. 10:29).

Their idea of law led immediately to definition, because behavior measured tasks, not attitude. Definition led to further definitions, clarifications, exceptions, contingencies, what-ifs and whatever other mental gymnastics were required to specify just exactly what to do. Thus, the creative mental exploits of the rabbis built a burden of law that eventually not even they could bear.

## **Fences**

To the Pharisees, life and death, blessing and cursing depended on their ability to follow the rules. God had to be pleased always. If one displeased God, watch out! They were afraid of God, afraid to the point of punctilious circumspection.

The rabbis thought their proliferation of rules would protect both the people and the Torah. Rules, they believed, kept the Torah sanctified and prevented people from coming close to sin. The rabbis called these rules "*fences*" because they provided additional space around what their scruples had defined as sin. A fence was a rule that kept people further away from breaking a rule by not letting them even get close. In the *Mishnah*, the part of the *Talmud* that records all the laws, the rabbis had a teaching saying the establishment of fences was one of the three main duties of a Jew (*Abot*, I.1.3).

## **The kosher laws**

Regarding the commandment concerning the kid boiled in its mother's milk, the rabbis reasoned that to be safe, one must not cook any meat in any milk. How would a person making a stew with milk and meat know if perhaps the milk came from the calf's mother? One might not know for sure, so they forbade any meat cooked in any milk, just to be sure.

What if one cooked the milk part of the meal separately from the meat part, then ate them together? Milk and meat would still contact each other, and even that could mean a mistake. Mixing any milk with any meat became regarded as unkosher, or unclean. But why stop there? Could they risk displeasing God?

Supposing a cook hadn't quite washed her pot thoroughly after the last custard, and a spot of dried milk remained on the pot. She threw some lamb chunks into the pot for a stew. HORRORS!! CONTAMINATION!! So another fence went up -- don't use a pot to cook a meal with milk, and then later use the same pot for meat. Use two pots; in fact, have two entire sets of dishes, cooking utensils, cutlery, etc. One gets used only with meat meals, the other with milk.

However, even separate sets of dishes won't guarantee ritual purity. They could get mixed up with each other. I witnessed this infraction once as a youth at a Jewish summer camp. The camp had a kosher kitchen with separate utensils and cookware. Separate refrigerators kept the milk and meat products. We segregated even the beverage pitchers, which might hold milk or juice, but never any meat products. A pitcher which once held milk could never serve juice at a meat meal. All the meat items had a red nail-polish mark. Once, someone accidentally placed a washed meat fork in the drawer for milk utensils. The camp rabbi had to go through a special service to atone for this breach.

"An affluent Jewish home will have separate dishwashers," note the Cohn-Sherbocks. The ultimate kosher kitchen is really two entirely separate kitchens. All these arrangements have one purpose: to prevent any possibility of a cooking or eating utensil used with meat from contacting one that had touched a milk product. Such anti-contamination measures, according to legalistic thinking, preserves both the law and the people.

The milk-and-meat issue had other considerations. If the mixing of milk and meat was unclean, then they couldn't be eaten together. But how long did one have to wait after eating the one before consuming the other? What constituted "*separate meals*?" Was ice cream for dessert OK after a roast lamb dinner? How about an hour later? The rabbis had to debate and establish laws to regulate when one could eat a milk product after meat, and vice-versa. Other arguments delved into the biochemistry of animal products (e.g., the rennet used in cheese production) to determine when in the process of production they became "*mineral*" and not "*animal*."

### **Locus of sin/holiness**

Implicit in the concept of fences is the legalistic concept of sin. Sin meant breaking a rule or coming in contact with something unclean. If a person kept from uncleanness, then he stayed holy. A person became more holy by keeping even further (sometimes literally farther, as in Luke 10:31,32) from external defilement or transgression. For instance, separating milk and meat came to mean not to eat them at the same meal, but Steinsaltz cites one especially pious rabbi who wouldn't even eat milk and meat on the same day. By observing fences even further away from the original law, one could establish a higher level of holiness.

If milk and meat caused sin, then that combination had to have something inherently wrong with it. The rabbis believed that there were some things outside a man, which by going into him, could defile him (ct. Mk. 7:15). This idea impinges greatly on our concept of evil. If one could avoid sin by observing rituals, then sin clearly had an external, not internal, origin. The Essenes, who considered the Pharisees slackers in matters of holiness, withdrew to the caves of Qumran for just this reason: avoid sin in a world of Gentile uncleanness. The Pharisees preferred their isolation without the inconvenience of ascetic monasticism. They did it with laws and punctilious circumspection.

The externalizing of sin had multiple effects. Avoiding certain foods constituted one large area of life. One could avoid certain combinations of foods, avoid foods from certain animals, avoid the animals themselves, avoid people who raised the animals, and so on. Clearly, the more one avoided, the holier one became. Holiness became a matter of how much fear an individual had, coupled with his acuity about recognizing potential pollutants. Holiness had nothing to do with one's relation to God, and it ignored the fundamental concept of the inherent sin-prone nature and natural lust we all have.

## Idolatry after all?

In the attempt to save the law, did the rabbis violate the first commandment? Had they made "self" a false God whom they worshiped? Let's look at a key issue concerning salvation, and a key Bible text which tells us clearly, "yes, they did." Legalism looks holy, but violates the supreme attributes of God.

Under the Pharisaic system, salvation and blessing resided in the individual. If you followed the rules, God didn't offer you grace; He owed you a reward. You had Him in your debt. He owed you blessing that you had earned. Thus, God was not really a judge of personal merit, but a dispenser of good and evil, according to what one had done. Although the *Talmud* itself says that one should follow the law not for the sake of reward, but for the sake of duty (*Abot*, I), establishing laws inescapably demands the sequel of justification by works. If you obey, God must reward you; if you disobey, God must punish you. This might not sound so different from our Biblical theology. Worse yet, it might be our theology. That's the danger: Pharisaism appears so righteous and looks so close to the "real thing," it easily passes as true. Nevertheless, Paul labeled it as "utter refuse" (Phil. 3:8).

Why is it so bad if it comes so close? Because it reverses a critical factor: who God is. It puts oneself in charge of one's salvation. If you do good, you have earned blessing. God becomes merely the dispenser of the blessing you earned.

That's why in the little parable in Luke 18 (which could have easily been an actual event), the Pharisee prayed "with himself." The *Interlinear Greek-English NT* reads: "...to himself prayed: -- God, I thank thee..." He was his own God! Now you see the difference. It is the greatest manifestation of pride possible to think we can earn our salvation and blessing. We become our own false God, and the rules we make become our own false Word of God. We turn the tables on our Creator. Once we embark upon the path of rules as a means of holiness, we inevitably end in the same spiritual cul-de-sac: the idolatry of self as God. We can no longer apprehend the true God and His life-giving character and mercy. Thus, the condemnation of the Pharisees by our Lord Jesus: *But woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in* (Matt. 23:13).

# 6

## The Sabbath – Part 1

Of all the myriad rules and regulations the Pharisees kept to preserve their ritual holiness, the Sabbath rules stood at the top. Most holy of all their laws, the Pharisees believed that Sabbath-keeping provided a righteousness *nonpareil*.

### Their most important law

People who believe in salvation-by-works can believe in a hierarchy of their laws. For the Pharisees, ritual holiness defined their religion, and the Sabbath, with its sedulous adherence to minutiae, defined their ritual holiness.

The Sabbath laws became the most important for several reasons. Firstly, the Sabbath predated the Law, going back to Creation. Although the Genesis account gives no command concerning any worship on the seventh day, God did cease from His labors, setting an example. If God himself rested on the seventh day, the rabbis reasoned they could do no less. Moreover, they noted the precedence of the Sabbath over the Law in Exodus, when the Lord God instituted the Sabbath with respect to gathering the manna. This occurred before Moses ascended Sinai to receive the tablets of Law. The rabbis had such a strong belief in the legalistic ideas of precedence that they thus elevated the Sabbath to the pinnacle of all laws.

The sages also found evidence for the superiority of the Sabbath in the decalogue itself. In both declarations (Ex. 20: 1-17 and Deut. 5: 6-21), the fourth commandment is the longest of the ten. Only the second command, prohibiting graven images, has nearly as much elaboration. In the Exodus account, the model of God resting on the seventh day reinforces the command to rest. In Deuteronomy, God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage serves as the principle for abstaining from labor.

Sabbath-keeping also receives considerable reinforcement throughout the Old Testament. For instance, Ezekiel (Ezk. 20: 8-26) rebukes Israel at length for profaning the Sabbath. Nehemiah gives an account (Neh. 13:19-22) of enforcing the Sabbath upon his return to Jerusalem. Many other warnings occur scattered throughout the historical and prophetic books.

## Work not clearly defined

However, despite all the warnings about keeping the Sabbath, rarely does Scripture give examples of what constitutes "work." Neither of the declarations of the Sabbath commandment in the decalogue defines "work," although both say that work should cease for the entire household, animals included. Elsewhere we can find prohibitions against kindling (Ex. 35:3), gathering firewood or manna (Num. 15:32-36, Ex. 16:29) and carrying a burden (Neh. 13:19). Yet even these acts required definition: how much was a burden? What could be considered kindling? This last example has taken major implications in the technological era, when rabbis and scholars have grappled with all kinds of electric and combustion-engine driven machines and devices. Does a spark of electricity constitute kindling? Largely, yes.

Making *halachic* (rules governing daily activities) decisions often requires scientific investigation: for example, rabbis distinguish between turning on an incandescent light and a fluorescent light.

With all this grist for their legalistic mill, the rabbis of old elevated Sabbath-keeping into the holiest of all laws. Of course, this level of piety required precise definitions galore, and they went at it with an enthusiasm that has not abated in thousands of years. A quotation from Adin Steinsaltz's *The Essential Talmud* gives the flavor of the orthodox position on the Sabbath:

*"In the most general sense, the numerous Sabbath laws are an expanding network of minute details deriving from several basic concepts, which eventually create an almost Gothic structure made up of thousands upon thousands of tiny and meticulously fashioned details clustered around an original form."*

## Forty less one

So where did the sages of old begin when they undertook the task of delineating and categorizing the Sabbath restrictions on work? Because on the original day of rest God rested from the work of *creation*, they chose the concept of "creative activity" as the basic definition of work. To model creative activity, they chose the construction of the tabernacle in the wilderness. Also, two clear prohibitions against working on the seventh day come in the immediate context of the instructions for the building of the tabernacle (Ex. 31:12-17, 35:1-3). Thus, the activities involving the construction of the tabernacle became the basic categories of Sabbath "work."

The Mishnah, the written codification of the oral tradition, lists "forty less one" (*Shabbat* VII.2) categories of work prohibited on the Sabbath. Some of them came directly from the work of the tabernacle itself, e.g., spinning, warping, sewing, and dyeing. Other areas included the agricultural activities implied in the use of a finished product, such as linen cloth. These would include sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, and winnowing. These prohibitions would cover activities in growing the plants from which they obtained fibers for the linen cloth.

## Past and present regulations

From these thirty-nine categories, well established by the time of Jesus, came the thousands of specific *halachah*, or specific rules governing each situation and contingency. A few examples will help us understand how much of a grip the Sabbath *halachah* had on everyday life.

Some of these will come from modern times. The process hasn't died; in fact, it thrives, largely due to technological innovations which have created the need for hundreds of new rulings. The modern examples, however, follow fully the same methodology as the rulings of the ancient sages. They will give us a time-relevant reference to the picayune scruples of the legal mind. If we can get some appreciation for this mentality, we can comprehend the issues at stake when Jesus confronted the Pharisees and their Sabbath traditions.

- A tailor was advised to put down his needle a half-hour before sunset lest he inadvertently carry it on the Sabbath while searching for fleas in his cloth (*Shabbat* I:3).
- In an effort to make life somewhat functional on Sabbath, the sages created a vast system of casuistry that defined boundaries in every location. These boundaries artificially established the limits of one's domicile; for instance, it might include a whole section of a city. Certain areas, while physically outside one's home, still remained within the limits of one's domain so as not to transgress the command of Exodus 16:29 to stay in one's place. However, one very strict sect, the Karaites, wouldn't leave their homes on the Sabbath.
- The rabbis carefully distinguished between *wearing* and *carrying*. They had to decide if a woman's hair clip, for instance, was worn or carried. If carried, then it would be a burden and forbidden on the Sabbath. A woman could go into the courtyard of her house wearing a wig, but not into public streets. Of course, carrying a mat clearly violated the ban on bearing a burden, and the Pharisees used this to inculcate the lame man whom Jesus healed (John 5:10).
- Items normally used for work could not even be touched on the Sabbath. They were *mutzkeh* (off-limits) for fear of "accidental" use. The *mutzkeh* rules developed out of the idea of "fences," those rules meant to keep one even holier by avoiding anything even close to sin. For instance, if the use of a tool, such as a hammer, violated the Sabbath, then the tool itself became *mutzkeh* on the Sabbath, and contact with it meant defilement.
- The Talmud (*Shabbat* II:6) lists three reasons why a woman might die in childbirth. One of them has to do with failure to meticulously carry out her Sabbath duties. This teaching, one of many that specify rewards and consequences for various acts of obedience or disobedience, demonstrates the "exact retribution" mentality inherent in a behavior-based religion of rules.
- To open a refrigerator door on the Sabbath, one must first disconnect the interior light (before the Sabbath) lest one violate the injunction against "kindling," as modern interpretations consider that using or turning on a light comes under the category of "kindling." Letting warm air into the refrigerator also creates a problem, because that will cause the compressor to activate before it otherwise would have. This would cause the compressor to "spark," also a Sabbath violation. Therefore, one has a timer installed to run the compressor motor at set intervals, rather than a thermostat, which the door's opening would indirectly affect. Another proposed solution: open the door only when the compressor is already running.
- Sabbath laws defer to very few others, but the care of the seriously ill constitutes a class of exceptions. Dr. Abraham Abrahams lists many of these in his book, *A Comprehensive Guide to Medical Halachah*. If one does have to suspend Sabbath rules for a higher principle, such as care of the very ill, one must do so with the least possible intrusion into the Sabbath laws. Also, one must perform any act that would otherwise transgress the Sabbath in an *unusual manner* thus acknowledging Sabbath law. For instance, a doctor may drive on the Sabbath if

he must go to an emergency, but he should start the engine by turning the key with two fingers, not the usual thumb and forefinger. As to the vehicle driven to an emergency, the doctor must leave the motor running, as turning off the engine is not necessary to save life. If a doctor has to write, he must write with his left hand if right-handed (and vice-versa), use the minimum number of words possible, and sign with his initials, not his full name. A nurse or doctor applying an antiseptic to the skin on the Sabbath must use a nonabsorbent (i.e., nylon) swab as opposed to cotton which could absorb the medication and thus, presumably, be classified as working under the rubric of "*dyeing*."

- Does giving alms to a beggar who comes to your house violate the Sabbath? That depends, of course. In *Everyman's Talmud*, by A. Cohen, the author relates how the rabbis distinguished between a beggar reaching *into* the window of a home to receive alms and a householder reaching *out of* the window. Also at issue was whether the beggar *took* the alms from the householder's hand, or the householder *put* the alms in the beggar's hand. Thus, four possibilities existed, and they pronounced guilt or innocence accordingly. The only guilt-free way to give alms on Sabbath: the beggar stands outside, stretches forth his hand inside the house, and the householder puts the alms in his hand for him.

Jewish laws and customs also include many rituals for the celebration of the Sabbath, such as lighting candles at sunset, wearing one's best clothes, and eating festive meals. They maintained the Sabbath was a joy and a means of sanctification (Isa. 58:13). However, most of the Sabbath regulations concerned avoiding work. The less one did, the more holy one became. Just to make sure, one did less and less, until one became totally useless to anyone.

### **The battleground of faith vs. law**

So it was that against this thinking and its concordant practices came the Lord Jesus' program for dismantling the Jewish idea of the Sabbath. In much the same way that Paul would later use circumcision as the main representation of the law (Acts 21:21, Gal. 6:15, Rom.2:29), Jesus used the Sabbath and its traditions. He used the Sabbath as his battleground because it made an ideal subject for his teaching of the Gospel of Grace. We know from Colossians 2:14 that the Lord slew the law at his crucifixion. We sometimes fail to appreciate that he also slew the Law during his ministry (e.g., Mk. 7:15).

He did this with a succession of miracles, each more prominent than the last, during his ministry. Each miracle involved the healing of a sick person. In each case, Jesus could have waited till after the Sabbath. He repeatedly chose to heal disabled or chronically ill people, those who could have easily waited a few hours until sundown. As the healings increased in complexity and in overt confrontation to the Pharisees' legalistic traditions, so likewise the Pharisees' opposition increased.

Starting with healing a man in a Capernaum synagogue and culminating with giving sight to the man born blind (John 9), Jesus systematically displayed the need to "*judge not by appearances, but to judge with right judgment*." He repeatedly challenged the Pharisees on the points they would consider most holy, to find out if they could somehow elevate their minds beyond their own traditions.

Alas, positive responses, if any, remain all but unrecorded in the Gospels. Instead, the Lord Jesus found a people who had thoroughly enmeshed their own traditions with the word of God. They zealously strove to protect both themselves and the Torah with their "*fences*," but those fences obstructed their view of the Messiah. They couldn't see the signs of God's son when he preached and healed in their very presence. So

blind were they because of tradition, they couldn't see a man walking who had never walked before -- they only saw a man carrying a mat on the Sabbath, forbidden by their traditions.

The Pharisees' definitions meant nothing in God's eyes. The Sabbath had a greater meaning that they had entirely obfuscated. So the Lord Jesus went right to their perceived stronghold, repeatedly making pointed attacks against the traditions of men. As we trace the development of his offensive, and see the deliberate and calculated progression of both attack and rebuttal, we will view the greatest theological contest ever waged.

Lord willing, in the next two articles, we will explore this remarkable sequence of Jesus' healing miracles on the Sabbath.

# 7

## The Sabbath – Part 2

The Lord Jesus' miracles on the Sabbath include seven healings recorded in the Gospels. These healings form the backbone of his assault against Pharisaism. We will inspect the sequence of healings to note the designed increase in overt antagonism.

### The Sabbath Healing Ministry of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath

- Demoniac in the Synagogue [Capernaum] Mark 1:21-28, Luke 4:31-37.
- Peter's Mother-in-Law [Capernaum] Mark 1:29-31; Mt. 8:14-15; Luke 4:38-39.
- Man with the Withered Hand [Capernaum] Mark 3:1-6; Mt. 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11.
- Man Paralyzed Thirty-Eight Years' [Jerusalem] John 5:1-18, 7:23-24.
- Woman with Eighteen Years Infirmity [Judea, near Jerusalem?] Luke 13:10-17.
- Man with Dropsy [Jerusalem?] Luke 14:1-5.
- Man Born Blind [Jerusalem] John 9:1-41.

The list above shows in probable chronological sequence the seven healing miracles the Lord Jesus did on the Sabbath. The first three occurred in Galilee, the last four in or around Jerusalem. The first two had no opposition from the Pharisees. The last five all had significant opposition as the gospel accounts record interaction between Jesus and his adversaries concerning the healing. In each event, the Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath. As we move through the exposition of each occurrence, we will see the escalating conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees on the issue of the Sabbath.

### Proclamation of the Sabbath healing ministry

Doubtless Jesus did his first miracle early in his Galilean ministry when he taught in a Capernaum synagogue. Luke records this healing shortly after his record of Jesus' reading of Isaiah in a Nazareth synagogue. Significantly, the text he read prophesied his Sabbath ministry. Isaiah spoke of the Messiah who would *"proclaim release to the captives, recover the sight of the blind, and set at liberty those who were oppressed"* (Isa. 61:1,2). Jesus did all these on the Sabbath, opening the eyes of the blind and unloosing those who were captive to their infirmities. When the Lord Jesus proclaimed, *"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,"* he may have meant to

emphasize *today* as the Sabbath. He may also have intended to use the text from Isaiah as a general proclamation of his teaching, of which his Sabbath healings became figurative enactments of liberation. In either case, the Sabbath proclamation is recorded immediately before the record of his first Sabbath miracle.

## 1. The first Sabbath healing

Immediately after proclaiming the Messianic stamp of his ministry in Nazareth, the Lord Jesus found his life in danger. The Jewish leaders reacted sharply to his citations of the Bible's providential blessings to faithful Gentiles. They took him to the edge of a cliff, but he escaped (Luke 4:28-30), and showed up, presumably the very next Sabbath, in the Capernaum synagogue (v. 31).

His teaching alone astonished the audience on several Sabbaths (Luke 4:32), but the crowd could have had no idea what they were to witness on one Sabbath. Mark uses his characteristic "*immediately*" here describing the man's appearance before the Lord Jesus. Possibly the man had just entered the synagogue, or perhaps he had just had a convulsive episode. Unlike a later synagogue healing, he does not appear to have been "*planted*" by the Pharisees.

This miracle leaves the man's infirmity somewhat vague; it is the only healing where we don't know the malady Jesus healed. The record only states "*an unclean spirit*," a phrase usually associated with mental disorders. The man probably had a chronic mental condition, but the immediate occasion sounds like an acute episode. Chronicity would become a key issue in the Sabbath healings, as Jesus pointedly performed cures on the Sabbath that could have waited. The first two miracles have the least overtly challenging aspect here, as Pharisaic tradition allowed for suspension of the Sabbath laws in the case of life-threatening emergencies.

In this first healing, Jesus performed no "*work*," that is, he did nothing physical at all to or with the man. In the other healings, he had at least some physical activity or contact with the healed individual. In his final healing, he would overtly do "*work*" (by the Pharisees' definition). Thus, he commenced the Sabbath healings in the least intrusive manner. He only spoke the word, and the unclean spirit came out of the man. He proved that he had the power to heal. Anything physical or ritualistic he might do at later healings would be added to denigrate the Pharisaic Sabbath.

Neither Luke nor Mark records any opposition or gainsaying of anyone in the synagogue. This was the first and last Sabbath healing that Jesus did in a public setting without opposition. News of the miraculous healing spread rapidly (Mark 1:28), and the Pharisees would make their presence known the next time Jesus healed on the Sabbath in a synagogue.

## 2. Peter's mother-in-law

All three synoptic gospels record this Sabbath healing. Matthew, who didn't record the previous episode, places this healing in a collection of healing miracles (Matt. 8:14-17). Luke, as always, has the most thorough medical description, noting that Peter's mother-in-law had a high fever. However, though she may have been very sick, or perhaps in a life-threatening situation, it also appears that in this instance the Lord Jesus could have waited a short time for the Sabbath to end. The healing

probably came in the late afternoon, for the details "*after they left synagogue*" and "*when the sun was setting*" frame Luke's narrative.

In this, the only private Sabbath healing, Jesus took hold of the woman, and she served him when she recovered. Had the Pharisees seen this, they doubtless would have objected vehemently, even if they gave allowance for her acute condition. Once healed, she had no business -- by their value system -- "*servicing*" on the Sabbath. She'd have been holier sick in bed than useful to the Lord.

### **3. The man with the withered hand**

This third miracle receives extraordinarily detailed coverage in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Reconstructing the incident from a compilation of the three accounts yields a dramatic confrontation, not fully revealed in any one of them. This is the first miracle directly opposed by the Pharisees. We have good reason to believe they precipitated the confrontation by bringing the man into the synagogue for the express purpose of testing the Lord Jesus' interpretation of the Sabbath.

#### **Lord of the Sabbath**

This incident follows the eating of the grain, the only other specific "*violation*" (other than the healings) of the rabbinical Sabbath traditions cited in the Gospels. Jesus countered the Pharisees' accusations by referencing the priority of the priests' service over the Sabbath. Jesus continued by saying that something greater than the temple, which the priests served, was here. He himself was that something, and he declared, "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, so the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath*" (Mark 2:27-28).

The temple, representing ritualized religion, held its servants in bondage to its rituals and sacrifices. Jesus, representing grace, came to manumit those who would accept the gospel of grace. The Sabbath was not Lord over Jesus; he was Lord of the Sabbath. The Jews who rejected Jesus remained in bondage to the Sabbath, which represented their bondage to the law. It was Lord over them. So the title "*Lord of the Sabbath*" brings to mind freedom in Christ through the grace of the New Covenant.

#### **Inviting confrontation**

All three gospel accounts place the grain-eating incident immediately before the healing of the man with the withered arm, but only Luke says it was on *another* Sabbath. Also, only Luke has the detail, "*whose right hand was withered.*" He may have suffered an injury, or he may have had a congenital deformity. If it was the result of an injury, it would take months or years to develop the severely shriveled condition that the word "*withered*" describes. In either case, it was a long-term disability issue, not an acute health problem requiring immediate intervention. The man could have waited a few hours till sunset had Jesus not chosen to rock the boat.

However, this situation demanded rocking the Pharisees' boat. It seems the Pharisees were now out looking for a confrontation, so they brought the injured man into the synagogue, and, as the records state, "*they watched to see what Jesus would do.*" They knew he *could* heal the man on the Sabbath. Jesus knew he *had* to heal the man on the

Sabbath. Being Lord of the Sabbath, he must heal the man and teach the proper use of the Sabbath, and show the Pharisees that he had no regard for their Sabbath traditions.

So the first clash took place in the Capernaum synagogue. Here we must integrate the three gospel records to get the full dramatic impact. Matthew has the incident starting with the Pharisees asking Jesus, "*Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?*" Mark and Luke omit this; instead, they have Jesus calling the man to the front of the hall, and questioning the Pharisees. Luke adds that Jesus knew what they were thinking, reinforcing the suggestion that they had placed the man in the synagogue as a test. Mark records Jesus asking the Pharisees, "*Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?*" Going back to Matthew, we have a third question, Jesus asking the Pharisees if any of them would not pull a sheep from a pit on the Sabbath. Of course, they would answer yes; the rabbinical traditions covered the various aspects of this issue. Then Jesus said, "*How much more value is a man than a sheep! Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.*"

### **Reconstructing the sequence**

Reconstructing the event from the records, we would place the Pharisees' question to Jesus as the instigation. They asked him about the legality of Sabbath *healing* (Matthew). Jesus retorted with his own question about whether it was lawful to *do good* on the Sabbath. The Pharisees, as was usually the case, asked Jesus the wrong question. The legality of healing on the Sabbath was only an issue within the rabbinical traditions. The real issue was, is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Of course doing good is lawful -- in fact, God requires it. That is why Jesus wouldn't -- to avoid upsetting the Pharisees -- delay the healing until sunset. He had to do a non-emergency cure on the Sabbath to destroy the traditions of men which negated the law of love.

So the Pharisees asked, "*Is it lawful to heal?*" Jesus retorted, "*Is it lawful to do good?*" Then he called for the man to come forward. All eyes fixed on the two men at the center of the synagogue. We can imagine the tension as the Lord's piercing eyes looked around and through the assembled rabbis. What would happen next? The silence broke with the command from the Lord of the Sabbath: "*Stretch out your hand!*" At once, for the first time in years, the man extended his atrophied, shriveled arm, now fully muscled like his left. As the man gaped, overcome with awe and joy, he saw a look on the Lord's face no one ever saw before or since. Unable to answer his questions for fear of inculcating themselves in their own hypocrisy, and inert to the wonderful blessing the Lord had bestowed on the man, the Pharisees generated in the Lord Jesus a unique reaction. This is the *only* reference in the Bible to Jesus being angry. "*He looked on them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart,*" reads Mark's record (Mk. 3:5).

The Pharisees did not see a healing. They did not see a figurative emancipation from the thralldom of the flesh. They did not see the power or the goodness of God. They did not see the fulfillment of grace. They could only see an infraction of their Sabbath traditions, although it would be hard for us say exactly what they saw wrong, for Jesus only spoke the words, "*Stretch out your arm.*" But such it is when the legal mind finds itself confronted with good works. The work itself means nothing. Beneficence means nothing -- only formalities and tradition count. No wonder the Lord was grieved at their hardness of heart.

Then, in the culmination of their perfidy, the Pharisees immediately congregated outside the synagogue and held counsel (with the Herodians, no less!) to plot to destroy Jesus. They did evil on the Sabbath. Jesus had just asked them about the "*legality*" of doing good vs. doing harm, or saving life vs. killing. They held their peace for fear of being exposed as hypocrites. Now they proved their hypocrisy beyond measure -- they plotted on the Sabbath to kill the Lord of the Sabbath, because he had done good.

So the first of five direct Sabbath healing confrontations ended in what was to become a familiar pattern. Jesus, having done good and having proven his Scriptural authority to do so, left the hardhearted religious establishment so bewildered and embarrassed they plotted to kill him. However, the Lord, in full charge of his own life, moved his campaign against the law to the heart of the law, Jerusalem.

# 8

## The Sabbath – Part 3

The last four Sabbath healings come in pairs. Two of them only Luke records, the other two we find only in John. The two in Luke, of course, emphasize medical aspects. They have similar structures, and in both Jesus justifies his actions with reasoning that uses the Pharisees' own academic methodology.

The two healings in John's gospel also have similar structures and a number of unique points in common. Jesus' last recorded Sabbath healing, the man born blind, follows the pattern of the healing of the man with thirty-eight years' infirmity.

We can tentatively place the two healings recorded in Luke in between the two in John's chronologically, but for purposes of analysis in this article we will address first the two in Luke and then the two in John. As the chronology of the seven Sabbath healings doesn't come easily, we have chosen a pattern format rather than a necessarily chronological sequence.

### Two brief accounts

Luke alone records the accounts of the woman with eighteen years' infirmity and the man with dropsy. The Lord Jesus healed the woman in a synagogue and the man in the home of a prominent Pharisee. Both appear to be near Jerusalem, but Edersheim (Alfred Edersheim in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*) places them in Perea. Both healings have Pharisaic opposition, although the Pharisees (as a group) have no recorded dialogue. Jesus silenced them by taking the initiative of asking them pointed questions, anticipating their objections.

### 4. Eighteen Years' Infirmity

The woman with eighteen years' infirmity (Luke 13:10-16) could have waited the few hours until sundown to be healed. Obviously, her degenerative spinal condition constituted no life-threatening illness. Eighteen years of gradually increasing decrepitude wouldn't considerably worsen in the next few hours, as unpleasant it must have been to be "*bent over together*." Folded at the waist, always looking at the ground (cp. Lk. 21:28), she strained to see even where she walked.

Yet she came to the synagogue; apparently the Pharisees had nothing to do with her presence -- this was not one of their set-ups to trap Jesus. Perhaps she had heard Jesus the healer and teacher would be at that synagogue on that Sabbath. Upon seeing her, Jesus immediately called her to the front, and declared her free from her infirmity. Then he laid his hands on her, and, for the first time in nearly two decades, the woman

stood upright. Now she could look into the love and compassion of the Master's eyes! She may have had no recognition of the theological implications of what Jesus had done, but she knew her body was restored to youthful fitness. Can we imagine her joy?

### **The Pharisee's reaction**

Someone else in the synagogue saw a different scenario. The ruler (chief elder) of the synagogue saw only a violation of the Sabbath; he was unable to appreciate in the slightest the woman's relief. But what was the specific charge? Which rabbinical precept did Jesus transgress?

Laying on his hands? Declaring her healed? Which of the 39 categories or hundreds of rulings did he have in mind? Possibly nothing -- except the fear that this act would lead to something worse. So he remonstrated with Jesus, saying that he had six other days of the week to do such things, not on the Sabbath.

The ruler was not alone in his sentiment. Jesus, anticipating the objections of the assembly, answered them all in the inclusive, "*you hypocrites*," plural. Luke wrote "*the Lord*" answered them, indicating Jesus' role as Lord of the Sabbath. The force of "*ought not*" in "*ought not this woman...be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath*" (v. 16) is "*must*." This word, according to *Vine's Expository Dictionary*, denotes "*a logical necessity*" (cp. Lk. 24:26). While the chief rabbi and the other Pharisees deemed the Sabbath the only day excluded from healing, the Lord Jesus deemed it the day he must heal. The "*other six days*" proposed by the chief rabbi wouldn't do for the teaching of the Sabbath's role in human restitution. Certainly Jesus did heal many on the other six days.

But only a Sabbath healing could indicate the figurative redemption of this daughter of Abraham as an act of grace, not works.

### **Using the Pharisee's logic**

Moreover, the Lord took a line right out of the Pharisees' own teaching to reveal their hypocrisy, and justify his prerogative to heal. He cited their own easement of Sabbath regulations to provide for the normal, necessary care of their beasts (Edersheim gives the Talmudic details). They would have to unbind the animal from its stall to lead it to the trough. If unbinding is permissible for the animal, is it not permissible for a human? This type of reasoning would hit home with the Pharisees, for it was exactly the same way they would use precedent and analogy to establish Sabbath strictures.

Luke adds one more perspective to the event to close the narrative, that of the common folk also in the synagogue. The episode ended with the Pharisees put to shame, and the common folk delighting in both the healing and the Lord's theological triumph. For the Pharisees, it was another humiliation. From the woman's perspective, it was a joy so intense and unreal she probably took weeks to adjust to her new view of life. For Jesus, it was another installment in demonstrating the theology of the Sabbath.

## 5. The Man With Dropsy

Soon after this, Jesus dined at the home of a prominent Pharisee. Evidently the "*ruler who belonged to the Pharisees*" invited Jesus, and also another person, who had dropsy. The word "*dropsy*" comes from transliterating the Greek *hudropikos* and has nothing to do with "*dropping*." The man didn't have a neurological disorder which caused him to fall down or drop things. Rather, it refers to what we call today edema, or fluid accumulation. Edema, itself a symptom, could indicate various diseases. In any event, the man would have had turgid extremities, a distended belly, and shortness of breath. This was a true medical condition, and definitely in a different category from that of the woman with the degenerative spine.

### Pharisees silent

Could the Pharisees possibly object to Jesus healing the man? Jesus, knowing their eristic inclination, put forth a question they should have known the answer to by then regarding the appropriateness of Sabbath healing. He asked exactly the same question that other Pharisees had proposed to him when he healed the man with the withered arm (Mt. 12:10). He had repeatedly demonstrated the "*legality*" of Sabbath healing both through his power and his use of their own argumentative methods. What could they say? Anything they said would further diminish their waning credibility, so "*they held their peace*." They had nothing to say.

Jesus healed the man, and then gave the Pharisees another lesson. Using a similar line of Pharisaic reasoning, and, undoubtedly quoting one of their own Sabbath rulings, he cited the legality of rescuing an animal from a pit on the Sabbath. If this applied to a beast, how much more so to a man? Again, they had no reply. Jesus had stultified them with both his intellect and his divine power of healing. The now healthy man, free of both symptom and underlying disease, rejoiced. The Pharisees had another long night. Like Pharaoh, they hardened their hearts and ignored the work of God in their midst, for they had too much personally at stake to admit their error.

### John's healing accounts

The two episodes in John give the most complete account of the Pharisees' enmity toward Jesus and Sabbath healings. The two healings both went to the extreme as regards Jesus' intentions of Sabbath confrontation. The two men represented the two most chronic conditions of all -- 38 years without walking (5:1-18) and a lifetime of sightlessness (9:1-41). John's narratives contain many features unique among the Sabbath miracles: both incidents occurred in the heart of Jerusalem, and Jesus overtly added elements of "*work*" to further provoke the Pharisees. Both have Jesus looking for and finding the healed person sometime afterwards, and both involve the healed person in the dialogue. Theologically, both incidents led to discussions of sin and judgment, and Jesus' relationship to the Father.

## 6. The Invalid at the Pool

Thirty-eight years can lead us to consider Israel in the desert, but if we look solely at the symbology, we will miss the human side of the incident. This man had lain by the pool since before Jesus' birth. Jesus came up to him and asked, "*Do you want to get better?*" This question didn't indicate any disregard Jesus had for the man's motivation or intelligence. Rather, it had to do with the man's faith in Jesus as the Messiah. For these 38 years he believed he had to have some special ritual ablution in the pool. Jesus merely instructed him to walk.

### Deliberate confrontation

However, the Lord went beyond the instruction to get up and walk. He told the man to rise, *take up his sleeping mat and walk*, a detail so important that it comes up five times in the text (5:8, 9, 10, 11, & 12). John records the crux of the event tersely, "*Now that day was the Sabbath.*" Healing was one thing; the Lord had demonstrated that it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Now he had instructed the man to carry his bedroll. This would clearly violate the Sabbath injunctions against carrying a burden on the Sabbath. Jesus had created an overt confrontation over a scruple.

Wouldn't it have been better for the Lord to wait just a few hours, still do the healing, and avoid all the hassle? Did he have to tell the man to carry his bedroll? Was that really necessary?

Yes! He had to destroy the Pharisees' notion of legalistic righteousness. He had to destroy the Sabbath as they kept it. This was not youthful insolence or smug self-righteousness. This was a necessary part of the work of the Messiah, to emancipate all those who would have faith in his word.

### God works on the Sabbath

Amazingly, the Pharisees had no eyes for seeing a man walk for the first time in nearly four decades. They had no facility to share in the joy of healing. They couldn't see the power of God at work in their midst. They only saw one thing: a man carrying a burden. So they interrogated the man, asking him who directed him to carry the burden. They held him in violation of the law, and they likewise held Jesus culpable, for they decided that he, too, kept not the Sabbath (5:16).

The Pharisees also misinterpreted his claim that God was his father (v.18). They thought he claimed divinity, and they thought he broke the Sabbath. Neither, of course, was true. But his Father was still working, and this formed the basis of the Lord's Sabbath ministry.

"*My Father is working still*" (v.16) means God has never rested. On the seventh day of creation, with the work of creation finished, He ceased from his creative working. But he never stopped maintaining His creation. Since the beginning, the work of saving and rescuing His people has been a full-time, seven-day-a-week job (Psa.

121:4). He always hears prayers; He always forgives, restores, sustains, cares for, and upholds His creation and all that dwell in it.

Did the Jews ever consider that Creator God was also Maintainer God? God never stopped working. If He did, Earth would have ended on the seventh day. Ezra the scribe understood this. Ezra's doxology (Neh. 9:6) describes the first six days of creative work, followed by the work of the seventh day, "*and thou preservest them all.*" This is what Jesus meant when he said "My father is working still." The Sabbath brought restoration to the world of the six-day creation.

## **7. The Man Born Blind**

The last and greatest Sabbath healing (John 9:1-41), has many superlatives. It has by far the longest text (41 verses) of any of the Sabbath healing accounts. It has the most "*chronic*" and hardest to cure (from a human physiological perspective) disability (v. 32). It takes place in the temple itself. It features the most obvious of Jesus' derogations of the Pharisees' Sabbath scruples. And it ends with a condemnation of the Pharisees like no other Jesus uttered (v. 41).

Jesus had just engaged the Pharisees in the temple concerning the women taken in adultery. John 9:1 states, "*As he passed by he saw a man blind from birth.*" Probably a beggar at the temple steps, this man had never experienced sight. In his world of darkness, all days looked the same. Unable to discern day from night, he could have no perception of his own of when the Sabbath started or ended. When Jesus asked the lame man, "*Do you want to be healed,*" that man certainly knew what walking meant. But how could a congenitally blind person have any concept of sight? Only after the healing would he be able to reflect on his previous world of only four senses.

### **Jesus deliberately worked**

Could Jesus have waited the few hours till sundown? Would the man have any way of knowing? Could a man blind from birth have waited? We ask these questions to point out the increasing vexation that Jesus put upon the Pharisees. This time, he went one step further than ever before: the Lord did "*work*" as part of the healing process. This time, the Pharisees could cavil. Jesus spat on the ground and made clay. Did he have to do this to give the man his sight?

Of course not. On previous occasions he but spoke the word, and sometimes laid on his hands. The Pharisees would have to strain to fit those actions into their categories of work. Then he asked the lame man to carry his mattress. That was clearly "*work.*" Now he did the work himself. He had to do it to show the Pharisees that "*the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*" This was the most deliberate of all the Lord's Sabbath derogations. His act of healing was unnecessarily timed and included an unnecessary work, or so the Pharisees would judge.

## Legalists reject Messiah

John, just as he did in 5:9, duly records, "*Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes*" (v.14). Again, the Pharisees, blind to the healing, had selective vision only for the "*violations*" of their code. They deemed Jesus guilty of making clay on the Sabbath, carrying a load, and probably also furrowing the earth to gather the dust. Their conclusion: this man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath. Judging the Lord's actions by their own standards which they had elevated to *Vox Dei*, the Pharisees condemned themselves. They could not allow the Messiah into their lives, because in their substitution of things man-made (laws) for things divine (grace), they excluded the possibility of Jesus being the Son of God.

The Pharisees not only excluded Jesus, they also excommunicated the healed man. But Jesus found him and revealed himself to the now (literally and figuratively) sighted man. The Pharisees, on the other hand, claiming to see, received condemnation from Jesus. Why? Because they saw the obvious works of God and chose to ignore them to cavil over scruples. Because they had eyes only for judgment, Jesus pronounced them guilty.

Alfred Edersheim in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, eloquently sums the theological and human contest of the Sabbath: Jesus, who represented the on-going work of God and His role in our salvation, versus the Pharisees, who represented the man-made system of rules and justification by adherence to them to the uttermost iota.

*"While they [the Pharisees] were discussing the niceties of what constituted labor on a Sabbath, such as what infringed its sacred rest or what constituted a burden, multitudes of them [the suffering people] who labored and were heavy laden were left to perish in their ignorance. That was the Sabbath, and the God of the Sabbath of Pharisaism . . . Nay, if the Christ had not been the very opposite of all that Pharisaism sought, He would not have been the Orient Sun of the Eternal Sabbath. But the God Who ever worked in love, Whose rest was to give rest, Whose Sabbath was to remove burdens, was His Father. He knew Him; He saw His working; He was in fellowship of love, of work, of power with Him. He had to come to loose every yoke, to give life, to bring life, to be life -- because He had life: life in its fullest sense."*

# 9

## Jesus Confronts the Pharisees on Ritual Cleanliness

The Sabbath mission of the Lord Jesus climaxed when he healed the man blind from birth. He had proven his Lordship over the Sabbath by doing the Father's works on the Sabbath. He showed that God's plan for the Sabbath meant especially to sustain and restore His creation.

Combining miraculous healings of chronic conditions and irrefutable logic from the Pharisees' own play book, Jesus trounced the Pharisees convincingly on the issue of the Sabbath. By dismantling the Pharisees' Sabbath, the most ritually cultivated of all their myriad legalistic entanglements, he scored a complete victory for the New Covenant.

### Issue of ritual cleansing

Jesus went head-to-head with the Pharisees on other aspects of law vs. grace, too. One notable situation is recorded in detail in Matthew 15:1-28 and Mark 7:1-30. This time, the issue of ritual cleansing provided the basis of the contention.

The incident started with a confrontation in Galilee. A deputation of the "big," Pharisee leaders and scribes from Jerusalem, had come north to scrutinize the teaching and behavior of this upstart teacher and healer (Mt. 15:1).

They quickly found the fault they sought: Jesus and his disciples ate without washing. Alfred Edersheim, in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, suggests they found the alleged transgression at the feeding of the five thousand (Mt. 14:13-21) which he calculated was just the day before. If so, then this cavil would follow the same pattern as the Sabbath healings: Jesus does an astounding work, clearly showing the role of the Father's Holy Spirit, and the Pharisees see naught but the infraction of their picayune scruples.

The Pharisees overlooked the miraculous provision of food. They did notice, however, that Jesus and his disciples ate without first going through the washing ritual. Now this isn't the minor scene we have at home when our children come to the table with dirty hands. The washing the Pharisees found wanting constituted the ritual washing that "*cleansed*" a person of ritual uncleanness. This the Pharisees would do, say, after coming from the marketplace (Mark 7:3) where Gentiles also might sell their produce and meat. Not that the marketplace might be dirty; what really mattered to the Pharisees was the ritualized washing which symbolically cleansed them from any defilement they might have picked up by associating, be it ever so casually, with a

Gentile or anything unclean. To summarize a long and casuistic dialectic: the Pharisees' ritualized cleansings represented their approach to avoiding guilt by association. (Edersheim gives a detailed account with Talmudic references if you want a complete background to this issue.)

The Pharisees' allegation, "*Why do your disciples not wash?*" means "*Why do you ignore God's laws concerning ritualized cleansing?*" At issue was: (1) Did contact with the Gentiles in the marketplace constitute ritual defilement? and (2) Could defilement come from any external contact? This deputation of the wise and learned scribes failed miserably to consider the consequences of their question. Perhaps they had not yet enough experience with the Lord to know that his acumen would transpose their pedantic cavils into pertinent questions about the nature of God and religion. So Jesus, for the moment, avoided dealing with the accusation against the disciples by countercharging the Pharisees with a much higher level of defilement: transgressing the Word of God for the sake of their traditions.

### **Christ's devastating counter**

Jesus raised the issue of "*corban*," a transliteration of a Hebrew word which means "*gift*," but carries the connotation of a vow. Once a person designated something corban, it became the property of God and could not be restored to secular use, although it was retained by the owner until the time of his death. In this instance, the corban refers to a Pharisaic practice of dedicating to the temple assets which might have gone to support one's elderly parents. This way they got "*credit*" for making a big contribution to the Temple treasury (Mt. 6:2) but continued their use of the resource (as a building for their business, for example). Once he had designated money or property corban, a Pharisee could not help his parents with it even if they became desperately poor, although using it himself. Thus, Jesus accused them of violating the fifth commandment for the sake of their tradition.

Why did the Lord use the corban practice for his countercharge?

What is the connection between the corban and the ritual laws of cleansing? Wouldn't we have expected the Lord to find some inconsistency in the Pharisees' rules concerning cleansing? Why the jump to an apparently unrelated issue? For one thing, there was a connection, although it may have been obvious only to the Pharisees. Edersheim has an attractive suggestion about this; for our purposes we only need say that the entire account reflects an accurate accounting and detailed knowledge of the Pharisees' system both by our Lord and the gospel writers.

Also, the salient point of priority shines through regardless of the connection between honoring one's parents and ritual cleansing. The Pharisees' behavior exemplified the Lord's summary of Pharisaism: straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. Jesus told them straight out that they voided the word of God (the fifth commandment) for the sake of their own tradition, the corban offering. Their accusation of the disciples indeed exemplified straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel.

What good did it do to eat with washed hands but think with an unwashed mind? What good did it do to keep one's own rules, if one thereby voided the true message of God? It was as if those who practiced this had said to their parents, "*Go, be warmed and filled. Sorry but I gave your support money to the Temple treasury.*"

This gospel narrative continues with a lesson for the disciples and an ironic contrast. Jesus' quote of Isaiah 29:13 adds a prophetic dimension to the entire episode. In Mark, the quotation from Isaiah comes before he raises the counterexample of corban, where Matthew has it afterward. Likely he repeated the quotation, giving it twice for emphasis.

### **A lesson on uncleanness**

The Pharisees' fear of ritual defilement resulted in many of their prohibitions. They made rules to declare certain items unclean and certain behaviors unacceptable. They extended the prohibitions to avoid even coming close to something unclean. So, if they had visited the marketplace, they would wash in case they had inadvertently come close enough to non-kosher food that might have, by chance, alighted on them. Even worse, they might have even brushed against a Gentile in the crowd who was ritually defiled.

Leaving aside for now the issue of straining out gnats, let's look at the underlying principle of the Pharisees' scruples. They deeply believed that defilement came from external sources. They believed certain articles, foods, animals, etc., could be clean or unclean. A clean animal improperly slaughtered became unclean, but nothing could make an unclean animal clean. If something was unclean, for any reason, then contact with that item rendered a person unclean. The Pharisees' notion of holiness revolved around carefully defining that which could render them unclean, making rules that excluded contact or even the possibility of proximity with these items, and then following the rules scrupulously. (Virtually all Gentiles would be in a continual state of ritual defilement through touching a dead body, eating unclean food, contact with bodily issues, etc., without ever having ritually cleansed themselves according to Pharisaic law. ed.)

Then comes Jesus and teaches, "*There is nothing outside a man which by going into a man can defile him.*" Mark adds parenthetically, "*thus declaring all foods clean.*" This teaching would stun the Pharisees as much as "*It is lawful to heal on the Sabbath.*" He wasn't just declaring certain items clean that had been in the unclean category. He was dismantling an entire system of reckoning good and evil. Nothing outside a man can defile him.

Although we will save a full examination of this topic -- the locus of sin -- for a future article, we will note now the Lord's elucidation of the matter. Defilement, taught the Lord Jesus, came from within; out of the heart of man came evil thoughts. Evil thinking begets all manner of vices, and these defile a man. Matthew's list has six entries, while Mark's has twelve. In both, "*evil thinking*" stands out as a heading, with the resultant actions of sin following. Things going in -- e.g., food -- pass right through the system; they have nothing to do with our thinking and attitudes.

The distinction between righteousness based on ritual cleansing versus righteousness based on faith could not be sharper. The gospels draw our attention to this with the immediate next event: Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman.

## **The Gentile woman**

The meeting occurred in the far reaches of Galilee, hard against the Tyrean border. A non-Israelite woman, hearing of the Lord's presence despite his intention to remain hidden (Mk. 7:24), besought him to heal her daughter. Matthew records her four pleadings before the Lord Jesus yielded to her importunity.

Of course, the Lord had no intention of ignoring her needs. He was demonstrating to his disciples, and to all who would read this account afterward, the difference between the righteousness of faith and the deceit of legalism. He had just dispatched the high and mighty Jerusalem contingent, the learned leaders of Israel. They came to him not with importunity to find healing, but with the wisdom of the flesh and eyes blind to the work of God. Then came a Gentile woman, a beggar, one who identified herself as a lowly dog merely asking for table scraps.

This precious woman knew that the promises belonged to Israel, but wasn't there a morsel for her? No arguing or faultfinding or ostentation from her, merely the humility of consistent pleading to the one whom she knew had the power of God. The Pharisees didn't plead for healing because they thought they were well. They didn't plead for Jesus' power because they blinded themselves to it, seeing only ritual infraction.

Could there be a greater contrast in players of the gospel drama than between the Jerusalem Pharisees and the Syrophoenician woman? No, for so Jesus needed to show the vast gulf that separates faith and legalism as far as the east is from the west. The high and mighty got nothing but condemnation from the Lord. To the lowly Gentile woman Jesus spoke the words we would all love to hear: "*Great is your faith.*"

## **Isaiah's prophecy**

Jesus' quote from Isaiah 29 hits right on the Pharisees' problem: They honored God with their lips, but their heart was far from Him. They worshiped therefore in vain, because they taught as doctrine the precepts of men. They claimed all manner of piety and devotion, but in reality they devoted themselves only to the false god of self. Moreover, their theogony was so grotesquely legalistic that it could pass for pagan myth. For instance, they had an anthropomorphic legend of God Almighty Himself going through a ritual cleansing after going down to Egypt to release His people. They had another teaching that God wore phylacteries that contained verses that spoke of His exaltation of Israel. Grace was so far from the Pharisees' hearts they could have no heart for Him.

A good Bible study principle is to examine the contexts of quotations to see if we can find other material relevant to the text which contains the quotation. In this case, we have ample reward, as we find the whole drama laid out before us, with perhaps a dozen or so details from Isaiah 29:9-24 falling into place in the gospel records. Perhaps most cogent is v. 17:

*"In a very short time will not Lebanon be turned into a fertile field, and the fertile field a forest? In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind will see, once more the humble will rejoice in the Lord."*

### **Lebanon -- Tyre & Sidon**

The reference to Lebanon, of course, predicts exactly the location where Jesus found humble faith -- in the region of Tyre and Sidon, in a Syrophenician woman. Isaiah states that Lebanon would become a fertile field, corresponding to the woman's faith, her fruit of the spirit. Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees continued in the agricultural analogy, *"Every plant which My Heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted"* (Mt. 15:13 NKJV). They had not faith, bore no fruit, and thus were weeds soon to be rooted up. Further, Jesus called them *"blind guides,"* echoing the wording of Isaiah 29:9 and 18. The Pharisees, who thought they knew all, were blind; the woman, who acknowledged her limited status, received sight.

The mission of the Pharisees' deputation from Jerusalem aptly fulfills Isaiah's description of faultfinders in v. 23; contrast that passage with *"the meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among men shall exult in the Holy One of Israel"* (Isa. 29:19). It was the Gentile woman, pleading for mercy from the Son of David, who placed herself among spiritual Israel. She obtained fresh joy in the Lord.

Isaiah's prophecy attests to the Lord Jesus' intentional use of the encounter with the lowly Syrophenician woman as a deliberate contrast to the self-righteous Pharisees. The lesson came first to the disciples and now to us. Those who would seek to create a God on their own, replete with a set of rules, contravene the truth of the Gospel of grace. They will fall condemned in their reputed wisdom. Those who seek the God of Israel with pleadings for His mercy find the blessings of grace. Have we ears to hear?

# 10

## The Early Church Confronts Legalism

As Jesus' earthly ministry drew to a close, he issued his final statement concerning the community of the Pharisees. Never had they won a single theological point against the Lord, never had they made the slightest adequate defense of their rules-and-rituals religion. Now, at the end, he can go no further with his legalist opponents; they are of no further use except as a good example of a bad example of religion. This series of woes against the Pharisees (Matthew 23) stands in contrast to the beatitudes with which the Lord commenced his teaching ministry.

To finish their evil work, they crucified the Son of God. But they were stultified yet again, for on the third day God raised Jesus from the death of crucifixion, seated him at His own right hand, and declared him Son of God in power (Rom. 1:4).

However, the Pharisees' foul work continued. Although Jesus had nailed their rituals to the cross (Col. 2:14), the Pharisees received this doctrine no better than anything else he had done with them in their many confrontations. Unaware of the utter futility of their religion, the Pharisees continued for centuries, finishing their Talmuds and commentaries and multiplying laws yet to this day.

### Continued opposition to the gospel

The emergence of the inchoate church created at least two crises for the Pharisees. One, of course, was theological. The Pharisees weren't by any means ready to capitulate on circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and so on. Now they faced not just one proponent of justification by faith, but an entire movement espousing, as they would esteem it, the heresy of dispensing with ritual law.

The other crisis was financial, and thus had a greater impact on the Sadducees than the Pharisees. The Jewish system required a substantial revenue base to support the Temple. Widespread defections from the synagogues to the ecclesias would have serious economic consequences. Although the New Testament writers do not explicate this point, we have enough information about the economics associated with the Temple (e. g., Mk. 11:15, 16) to posit that the new ecclesia would cause the Jewish leaders fiscal alarm as well as jealousy.

No wonder, therefore, that the early church faced the same opposition the Lord faced. He crucified the law, not its adherents. They crucified him, and lived on to continue

their destructive work. Unlike the immortal Jesus, the mortal church was vulnerable to the encroachments and assailments of the Pharisees. Jesus had won the theological battle for grace, and God proved it by raising him from the dead, but now came a new battle. Could an organized body of believers uphold a covenant of grace? The Pharisees lived on to fight against this movement. They provided the primary foil to the Lord's ministry, and they continued in that role with the early church. Except the riot at Ephesus (Acts 19:23-40) and the jailing at Philippi (Acts 16:19-21), every confrontation in the book of Acts came by instigation of the Jewish leaders. To fully realize the many ways in which the Pharisees confronted the early church would make a lengthy study. Some of their nefarious activities included:

1. Stoning Stephen and Paul (Acts 7:58, 14:19).
2. Inciting riots in public places ( Acts 21:30).
3. Pretending to be disciples to preach adherence to rituals (Gal. 2:4).
4. Writing letters, with Paul's signature forged, containing false teachings (II Thess. 2:2).
5. Bribing Greeks to riot against Paul (Acts 17:5, 13).
6. Accusing Paul of treason against Rome (Acts 17: 7, 18:12).
7. Accusing Paul of preaching for various selfish reasons (I Thess. 2:5,6).
8. Preying on vulnerable new converts to reclaim them into the law (Gal. 1:8; Col. 2:8).

The above list of Pharisaic strategies against the church only contains the deliberate efforts to dismantle the new religious institution. The Jewish leaders often had little regard for ethics or civility in their determined resistance to the growth of the new faith. Of course, they firmly believed they were protecting God-given truth. However, another threat to the Truth came from a different source, an entirely ingenuous group. These were the new believers who had yet to shed the vestments of ritual worship.

### **Judaizers in the ecclesias**

Paul distinguished between the deliberate onslaught of the Jewish leaders and the guileless legalistic inclinations of new converts. Judaizers clearly came in two classes: those who deliberately set out to wreak theological and physical destruction, and those who sincerely embraced salvation in Christ, yet struggled with the new idea of justification by faith, occasionally lapsing back into legalistic doctrine and practice. Of course, the first group preyed on the vulnerability of the second.

We can learn how Paul differentially treated these two classes by looking at one of his earliest letters, that to the ecclesias in Galatia. Here, with legalism the main issue in the survival of these ecclesias in central Asia Minor, Paul approaches the two persuasions with entirely different attitudes and strategies. Naturally, he addresses the letter itself to the struggling faithful in Galatia. He refers to the evil outside Judaizers, but we have no record of any direct writings to them.

So, Paul addresses the members of the ecclesias as brethren, not at all inculcating them. He treats them as the deceived, and the outside agitators as the deceivers. For the members of the ecclesia, he has compassion, although mixed with dismay. For those causing the problems, he has contempt. These people fall into two different classes, though they hold the same theological error. To the one, the misleaders, he would not yield or submit *"even for a moment"* (Gal. 2:5). To the others, the misled, he had patience to wait in travail *"until Christ be formed"* in them again (Gal. 4: 19).

We make this point on the distinction between the two groups of legalists to give us a perspective on handling similar issues in today's ecclesial environment. Currently, we have no parallel to what Paul and the early church faced in the first century. We have no equivalent of another religious group setting out deliberately to infiltrate and destroy our body from within. We have no opponents who believe we are a financial threat to them. We have no single religious denomination out of which we all came which has jealously set out to destroy our faith. While we certainly face oppositions, we have nothing to compare to the first-century ecclesias' struggle against the vehement antagonism of the Jewish establishment.

We do, however, have problems with legalism that develop out of our growth process in the faith, until Christ be formed in all of us. We all attempt, from time to time, to reduce the Truth to a code and foist our scruples on others. We need to be sure that we handle such back-slidings the way Paul would, as internal struggles of faith, not as external agitation.

### **The Holy Spirit Gifts**

So massive was the cultural and theological change inherent in the dispensation of the New Covenant, that the Lord God provided a unique support to His witnesses: the outpouring of His Holy Spirit gifts. A discussion of the first ecclesias' struggle with legalism requires a view of the work of the Holy Spirit gifts often left unnoticed. We usually explain the outpouring of the Spirit gifts in the first century as *"necessary for witnessing."* While healing a lame person will definitely add credibility to a public lecture, there's more going on. To fully understand the role the Spirit gifts played in the continuing controversy against legalism, we need to consider two additional scriptural perspectives. One concerns access to the character of God, and the other relates to God's acceptance of the Gentiles.

### **Import to the Jews**

The first aspect, that of access to the character of God, stems directly from the change from legalism to faith. It related to the necessary impact God had to make on Jewish minds that had not yet responded to Him or His Son. What would it take for God to change 1,500 years of entrenched traditions? How could God tangibly and forcibly show that oneness with Him came through faith, not law? What could God do to give an unmistakable imprimatur to the preachers of apparent heresy? Issues such as this created the need for manifestation of Holy Spirit gifts and powers in the early church.

A key passage in this regard comes from Galatians, probably Paul's first epistle directed primarily against legalism. Paul queries the believers who had begun to crumple under pressure from the Judaizers:

*"Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?...Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?" (Gal. 3:2,3,5 RSV).*

The surface meaning comes to us quickly: Paul reminds them that when they practiced legalistic religion, they had no manifestation of the Spirit. When they came under the operation of faith, they experienced the operation of the Spirit. Acts 14 records several miracles Paul and his band did in Galatia (Acts 14:4,10,20).

These miracles clearly testify to the working of God, and they also manifest His character. Healing, goodness, mercy, life, and all the attributes of Deity come to humans by the operation of faith. Under law, they had no such experience of God. They only had the sterile experience of the false religion of rules. They had no access to mercy or grace. They had no access to a living God, because their worship centered on the dead letter of the law (II Cor. 3:6). Through the apostles' miracles, Jesus showed the character of the God of grace.

The Holy Spirit gift of healing obviously brought healing. Tongues and interpretation of tongues brought unity to ethnically diverse congregations. Prophecy, teaching, and utterances of wisdom brought the authoritative word of God to formative ecclesias, and so on for other spirit gifts. Giving a foretaste of a relationship with a living God, the Spirit gifts reflected access to God unavailable through the law.

The Lord God and the Lord Jesus obviously well knew the struggle their people would encounter as the disciples established a religious movement based on faith in the risen Christ. They would have opposition from the Jews and Greeks on theological issues, they would have the daily wrestling of spiritual living in a pagan society, they would have the internal striving against the flesh, and they would face persecution from their jealous former colleagues in Judaism. They would have an entirely strange gospel to preach. They would have an entirely new relationship to build with the heavenly Father. They would have an immortal high priest in Jesus. How could they accomplish all the work of the gospel? God's answer: the tangible manifestation of His powerful Spirit, allotted to the apostles and their designees (Acts 8:18) for the work of establishing a community believing and preaching grace.

When we consider, then, the work of Holy Spirit in the first century, we should immediately consider first the historical context. It was the discarding of 1,500 years of futility under the law so that people could know God through faith in Christ. The gifts manifested the power and love of God, giving life to believers through their faith.

## **Gentiles, too**

Another message carried by the giving of the Spirit gifts came when the Gentile Cornelius and his household received the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44). This constituted evidence of their justification by faith. Now Gentiles, who had never had any national connection to the Lord God, received grace and acceptance into His family. Peter quickly and rightly interpreted the significance of the Holy Spirit gifts now poured out on Gentiles and immediately commanded baptism for them (v. 47).

Gentiles, too, received the Spirit! As uncomfortable as this may have been for Peter to accept, he took it at face value, and then defended his actions to legalistic brethren of the "*The Circumcision Party*" (Acts 11: 2). Initially appalled that Peter would even enter the house of Gentiles, let alone eat with them and baptize them, they castigated Peter and the six brethren with him (vv. 2, 3). However, Peter rehearsed the entire episode in their hearing, emphasizing the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius' household (vv. 15-17). This silenced Peter's foes, as even they realized that God had accepted Gentiles.

The giving of the Holy Spirit gifts showed the Jews that they could have a relationship with God only through faith, not through law. If faith, not adherence to law, was the key, then Gentiles could have the same faith. Bewildered Jews would now eat side-by-side with awestruck Gentiles, sharing in the same grace through the same faith. How compassionate God was to nurture his newborn church, a mixed multitude, with the guidance, teaching, healing, and witness of the Spirit gifts.

### **The Jerusalem Conference**

The Jerusalem conference brought to a head the controversy over keeping the law in the dispensation of grace. Some brethren in the ecclesia at Jerusalem believed new Gentile converts should, as they still did, practice the ritual laws. Note that Luke describes these legalistically-minded brethren as "*believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees*" (Acts 15:5). These brethren were of the class of sincere believers, but still not yet mature in their faith. The leading faithful brethren did not expel or ignore them; in fact, the whole conference seems a concession to their scruples. Unlike outside agitators, these brethren held sincere faith in Christ, but needed help in letting go of their deeply imbedded justification-by-works mind set. It was tough in those days, as brethren had to wait patiently for the light of Christ to shine in each heart as people matured, each at his own pace.

*"After much debate,"* the conference climaxed when Peter retold the episode about his call to Cornelius's house and the ensuing events (Acts 15: 7-9). Gentiles received the Holy Spirit and acceptance of their faith. Barnabas and Paul then related their own experiences of the Spirit gifts working among the Gentiles (v. 12). Finally, James summarized the evidence, added some scriptural exposition, and declared the law void with respect to Gentile converts. On the other hand, though, he cautioned that Gentile converts must cease their former pagan practices (vv. 19-21).

This approach carried the day. The key point again: God's character, demonstrated in His powerful gifts, made available to those outside the law. Jewish believers had to come out of legalism, and Gentile believers had to avoid lapsing into it. God accepts people by faith. He reveals His character to us only through faith. To establish this vital point for the newborn ecclesia, He manifested Himself through the Spirit gifts to Jews and Gentiles alike based on their faith.

Today we have different circumstances, but the same challenge. We can only apprehend the character of God through our faith, not through any code of rituals or standards.

# 11

## Saul the Pharisee Becomes the Apostle of Grace

The apostles continued on earth the work of the ascended Messiah. The original twelve (less Judas, plus Matthias), became the leadership core. Peter took primacy early on within this core group, fulfilling his commission from the Lord Jesus. Others also joined their ranks, notably prominent figures such as Barnabas, Luke, Timothy, Stephen, Titus, and Paul. The apostles guided the growing body of believers through the difficulties and stresses of Jewish opposition, internal strife, Roman persecution, organizational growth problems, difficult people, and all the other headaches and heartaches inherent in managing an organization whose product was *"a people for the Lord."*

### The unlikely apostle

One of the greatest of all the Lord's servants was a man who had no intention of aspiring to apostleship when he grew up. In fact, he dedicated his life course to destroying the work of the apostolate. Had the early church leaders drawn up a list of potential recruits, they doubtless would have omitted the name of Saul of Tarsus. More likely, Saul of Tarsus would have headed the list *"Least Likely Candidates for the Truth."* A bitter enemy and complete ideological opposite of Christianity, Saul seemed destined for a life of exquisite Pharisaism.

But as often happens, the ways of Providence surpass human ken.

The Lord God had a special role in the new synagogue of Christ that only Saul of Tarsus could fill. While all his life Saul thought he was preparing to be the chief rabbi, God had a different occupational goal in mind. Keeping this great theological person in his chosen field, but entirely reorienting his perspective, God took the man Saul for a very special role: the apostle of Grace.

Paul, as we better know him, scattered autobiographical bits throughout his letters. We also have Luke's first-person accounts of his speeches in Acts, where he had reason to mention his background. Although we have no one place where Paul gives his whole *"story,"* such as we might do when someone asks how we came into the Faith, he does give us enough background to help us get a reasonable picture of his early life.

## Top Pharisee

In this article we aren't so much interested in Paul's biography as we are in relating his theological background to his role as apostle of grace. We know that Paul (then Saul) was born in Tarsus, the son of a Pharisee who was also a Roman citizen. Paul went to Jerusalem early in life to study with the great rabbi Gamaliel. In his first Jerusalem trial (Acts 22:2), Paul introduced himself to the Sanhedrin as he who learned "*at the feet of Gamaliel.*" This phrase means more than we would take it for at first glance. It sounds like Paul is giving homage to his teacher, and that he hung on Gamaliel's every word. Actually, Paul used this figure of speech to remind the Sanhedrin just how important a figure Saul of Tarsus was, even from his earliest years in Jerusalem. In the synagogues, students sat in an arrangement that reflected their academic position. We have a description of a typical academic synagogue setting in which Paul would have studied:

*"The academy head presided, seated on a chair or on special mats. In the front rows opposite him sat the important scholars, including his colleagues or outstanding pupils, and behind them all the other scholars. When the academies grew larger, particularly in Palestine, the order of the seating was based on a precisely defined hierarchy. In the first row sat the great scholars, in the second row the less important sages, and so on"* (Adin Steinsaltz, *The Essential Talmud*).

We can, therefore, picture the apostle as a young man, seated front and center, at the very feet of the renowned and revered Gamaliel. Already at the top of his class, he was on his way to becoming the leading Pharisee.

Paul also wrote to the Galatians (1:14) that he was extremely zealous for the law, and his academic accomplishments exceeded that of many of his peers. This may have been a humble way of saying that he really excelled above everyone when it came to legalistic knowledge. Along with other mentions of his "*qualifications*" (Phil. 3:4-6, Acts 22:3, 23:6) we can assume that Paul had no superiors in the world of Pharisaism. Had not God intervened in his life, he was destined to become the next great rabbinical leader. Just as men like Gamaliel, Hillel, Rabbi Akiba, and many others have become Talmudic legends, so also Saul of Tarsus would have doubtless joined the list. Perhaps he may have achieved the great title of Rabbi Saul of Tarsus.

## The necessary apostle

To show why it was necessary that God would have to chose this man for the office of apostle, let us return for a moment to the main thesis in this series of articles: the primary theological contrast to faith is legalism. The battle against legalism first belonged to the ministry of the Lord Jesus. After his resurrection and ascension, the ongoing theological debates with the unconverted Jews required a new leader. Not one of the original twelve could carry forth in this arena. Jesus had carefully avoided selecting any academics among his first group of twelve apostles. He himself was self-educated (John 7:15); he established no academies or seminaries; he amassed no treasury, he relied on no honor. He chose "*to be with him*" fishermen and tax collectors, men of no repute save for the excellency of their faith (except Judas).

However, the growth of the new church after the resurrection necessitated a different type of apostle. God needed an expert in the law. He needed one who spoke with

absolute authority on matters of the law. If salvation were to come to the Jews through Jesus, then the preaching of the cross would have to come into the synagogue through an authoritative person. So it came to pass that the Lord God selected Saul of Tarsus. Later in life, Paul would recognize that this calling came from his mother's womb (Gal. 1:15); his life of Pharisaic education and religious practice had prepared him for apostleship. Little would he have thought as he studied and argued with the sages about abstruse points of ritual law that this was God's way of preparing him for the work of the gospel of grace.

God's selection of Jewry's leading figure accomplished three purposes. One, as we have just written, it gave the church the most qualified spokesman they could possibly have in the ongoing battle against legalism. Two, Paul's presence as a Pharisee presented unassailable credentials to anyone who wished to debate theology. As Paul had to remind various of his readers, he was the main gun of the Judaizers. He knew their methods from the inside. He could argue with the best of them, and for the other echelons who paid homage to standing, he stood as the finest. He had the status of leader, and the intellectual means to back it up.

A third purpose achieved in the selection of Saul the Pharisee to the apostleship related to personal grace. Paul gave us many details about his early life as a leading Pharisee. Later in life, he would call the supposed advantages -- refuse (Phil. 3:7,8). He would describe himself as a persecutor of the church, the least of all apostles (I Cor. 15:8-10), and the foremost of sinners (I Tim. 1:15). The Philippians passage tells of the excellency of faith, and the latter two passages emphasize the abundance of grace. If God could forgive Saul, he can forgive anyone. Saul vitriolically opposed God's work. He voted for the execution of Stephen, then the leading spokesman of the church. Saul was a completely evil person, but God put His finger on him, and said, *"I want you."* When he responded, God forgave him. Grace covered the multitude of his evils.

**Paul's theological conversion**

Before we look at a point concerning the nature of Paul's conversion, let's contrast Paul's former beliefs under law with his new beliefs in Christ. Using the autobiographical details from his letters and speeches, we can discern how this great mind reframed his entire career as a Pharisee.

<b>Saul the Pharisee</b>	<b>Paul the Apostle</b>
A Hebrew born of Hebrews (Phil. 3:5)	Neither Jew nor Greek (Gal. 3:28).
Circumcised on the eighth day (Phil. 3:5)	Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, but faith working through love -- a new creation (Gal. 5:6; 6:15).
As to righteousness under the law, blameless	By works of the law shall no man be justified (Phil. 3:5; Rom. 3:20).
Advanced in knowledge (Gal. 1:14)	Knowledge puffs up, love builds up (I Cor. 8:1).
Zealous for the traditions of our fathers (Gal. 1:14).	They [the Jews] have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened (Rom. 10:2).
Travelled widely to persecute (Acts 26:11)	Travelled widely to preach (Acts 13:2; etc.)

Paul had his value system entirely inverted. He discarded all the pillars of his self-righteousness: ritual holiness, works, rabbinical knowledge, traditions and genealogy. The "*foremost of Pharisees*," in Christian retrospect, considered himself only the "*foremost of sinners*" (I Tim. 1:15), and the least of the apostles. By using "*foremost*" ("*chief*," KJV), Paul seems to contrast his Pharisaic standing with his standing in Christ. As a Pharisee, he stood at the top by reason of his learning and ritual purity. Casting legalistic achievement aside, he acknowledged himself rather as the chief sinner -- and thus he found the possibility of receiving and accepting the grace of our Lord.

### **A personal plea**

Lastly, we will reflect on the nature of Paul's conversion episode. The apostles' witness failed to convince Paul of Jesus' messiahship. He didn't learn it through argumentation in the synagogues. It didn't come from his academic learning. Not even Stephen's magnificent proclamation swayed Paul; it was only a red cape waved in front of a bull. What did it take to get Paul where he needed to be? A personal appearance by the resurrected Lord Jesus. This experience with Christ, which Paul evidently recounted often as part of his witnessing, impacted him as no rabbinical debate ever had. Paul had all the knowledge of scriptures in place, but he lacked the perspective of reading with the veil on his mind lifted.

Saul the Pharisee, like all his fellow Jews, believed in a messiah (Christ), but he didn't believe that Jesus was the Christ until after the Lord appeared to him on the Damascus road (Acts 9:22). As he lay in darkness those three days in Ananias' house, he must have experienced something very new to him: being absolutely wrong. And this wasn't a theological debate. Jesus himself had proven his resurrection by appearing to and speaking to Paul. Paul's knowledge base took on a completely new perspective. The vitriolic opponent became the vehement proponent.

Paul became convinced of Jesus' messiahship through a personal encounter.

This is fitting, as our discipleship in Christ depends not on an intellectual apprehension, but on the realization that we serve a living Lord. However, we don't encounter Jesus visibly and audibly as did Paul, so it takes a greater effort of faith to believe in the risen Lord. Yet, he still appeals to us as he did to Paul. He reminds us that as we treat his people, we treat him. We have a living religious experience. This is totally the opposite of the dead letter of the law. This is how Jesus converted Paul. This is the message of the covenant of grace to us.

# 12

## A New Wineskin

*So far in our series we have dealt primarily with the historical development of legalism. Now we will begin an in-depth consideration of several theological issues. These issues, involving topics such as sin, forgiveness, righteousness, morality, love, mercy, spiritual growth, atonement, and repentance, all yield themselves to investigation from a law vs. grace perspective.*

*Our last article dealt with Paul's conversion; now we want to discuss our conversion. From our natural tendencies toward reducing faith to mere rules and rituals, we need to mature to the fullness of understanding God's great program of grace.*

### Points to date

First, we will summarize some of the key points of the previous articles, to get a comprehensive overview. This will refresh our thinking on this subject, and give us a "running start" as we move further on in our explorations of legalism and faith.

1. The Bible uses contrasts to help us understand concepts.
2. The main contrast to faith is not disbelief, but legalism.
3. The Pharisees, the greatest legalists ever, provided the main contrast and opposition to Jesus.
4. We can understand the New Covenant of grace only when we set it in contrast to the Old Covenant of law.
5. The first principles of legalism are "Rules, Rituals, and Rewards."
6. Legalism is not a Pharisaic invention, nor is it even a Jewish one. It goes all the way back to Adam and Eve.
7. Paul's quote from Genesis in Colossians 2:20-23 tells us that attempting to achieve morality by rules is a failing strategy of human origin.
8. Rules, in fact, have no effect on taming the lusts of human nature.
9. The Pharisees traced their theological lineage back to Ezra the scribe, when the oral traditions began. They also believed that God gave Moses all the details of the law, but it was up to them to re-create them.

10. The Pharisees, as a named distinct group, arose in the second century B.C., largely as a counter-movement to Roman and Hellenistic influences among the Jews.
11. They believed they were the custodians of the law, and they had to protect the law by adding more laws, which they called "*fences*." These laws became more important than Scripture itself.
12. The Pharisees believed that Jesus posed a threat not only to their system of religion, but also to the existence of the Jewish nationality.
13. Therefore, the Pharisees took great issue with Jesus on matters of traditional law.
14. The rabbis eventually wrote and codified the traditional, or oral, laws; we know this as the Talmud.
15. Pharisaic detail and attention to the smallest minutiae and all the possible exceptions and various circumstances were meant to keep a person undefiled and holy.
16. The Pharisees esteemed the Sabbath as the holiest of all their laws and observances. Therefore, the Lord Jesus specifically chose the Sabbath to perform healing miracles on chronically ill and disabled people which healing could have waited till another day.
17. By purposely violating the Pharisees' perception of the Sabbath, Jesus established his credentials as Lord of the Sabbath and showed that it is lawful to heal ("*do good*") on the Sabbath.
18. The Pharisees continued their role as antagonists during the early church era.
19. The witness of the holy spirit gifts testified to the New Covenant of grace and God's acceptance of Gentiles based on their faith, not on works of the law.
20. God appointed the leading figure in Pharisaism -- Saul of Tarsus -- to become Paul the Apostle, the chief spokesman of the new church's struggle against legalism.

## **The Universality of Bible Teaching**

As Paul and the other New Testament writers and leaders continued their struggle against Judaistic influences in the early church, they left us a legacy of Gospel and epistolary writings. These had special meaning to those who first received the writings, but the teaching of the New Testament applies to us as well. The scriptures relate to all times and peoples. The Bible, especially on issues of morality and theology, has a perspective that transcends its time and place of authorship, because the ultimate Author is He who transcends time and place. Rather than viewing the theological struggles of first-century Palestine and environs as a unique niche in history, we see it as a portrayal of human nature relevant for everyone, whenever and wherever they live or lived. Paul taught the universality of legalistic tendencies when he referred to rules-making as part of the "*basic elements of the world*" (Col. 2:20). Far from being just a Pharisee issue or a Jewish issue, legalism is a *people* issue.

Therefore, we read what the New Testament says about legalism not just as history, but as relevant instruction to ourselves today.

So don't look at the Pharisees as abnormal or unique. Look at them as a caricature of the excesses of the same human tendency we all have. We will lose valuable exhortation and instruction if we see the Pharisees and legalism as a "*then and there*" issue rather than as an illustration of our own situation, though highly magnified so we can't miss the lessons.

Another thought concerning viewing the Pharisees as "*an example for us*" -- under the Old Covenant, we would expect the expansion of legalism, since the Old Covenant had, at its basis, a code of behavior. It shouldn't surprise us that the Law only bred more laws (not righteousness) in its adherents. Extrapolating, clarifying, defining, limiting and all the other activities of the lawyers and Pharisees at least came as the natural outgrowth of the system under which they lived.

However, we face a much graver situation when we attempt to redefine the New Covenant into rules and rituals. What can we say of the New Israel when we propose to codify the covenant of grace?

It is from this perspective that we commence a theological study of legalism, and how we can avoid the tendencies of our human nature. We want to preserve the truth, in the real New Testament meaning of "*truth*:" the reality of God's revelation in Jesus (John 1:18) versus the shadows of the law. Reducing the truth to behavioral prescriptions and proscriptions places us back under the law, a position in which we have crucified the Son of God anew (Heb. 6:6), and removed ourselves from the grace that brings salvation (Gal. 5:4).

### **A New Wineskin**

In his brief parable about putting new wine into new wineskins (Mt. 9:17, Mk. 2:22, Lk. 5:37-39), the Lord Jesus addressed perhaps the most fundamental issue separating the divergent world views of legalism and faith. Jesus gave this little lesson in tandem with another, just as brief, about sewing a new patch of cloth on an old garment. In context, this pair of mini-parables came as part of the Lord's answer to his disciples' question regarding fasting. They had just been to a feast at Levi's (Matthew's) house, but some scribes and Pharisees present abstained from eating and rebuked them for their participation. The Pharisees complained about Jesus' eating with "*tax collectors and sinners*." The Lord replied, "*Those who are well have no need of a physician*," meaning that he came to call [those who recognized themselves as] sinners. He also added (in Matthew) the New Covenant prophetic quotation from Hosea, "*I desire mercy, not sacrifice*."

### **John's disciples puzzled**

The next question came from John's disciples asking why they and the Pharisees fasted, but Jesus and his disciples didn't. The Lord's reply here used the imagery of a wedding feast and the two brief analogies about new patches on an old cloth, and new wine in old wineskins. Evidently, this query came from Pharisees who had submitted to the baptism of John (Mt. 3:7) but had yet to understand the New Covenant fully.

Still stuck between Pharisaic ritual fasting and learning the principles of faith, they probably represented a frequently encountered position. Well into the apostolic era, and even today, we deal with the same issue. However, then and now, the old wineskin, representing the domain of law, cannot contain the new wine of the New Covenant.

### **No new law code**

That is to say, Jesus did not give his life to usher in another code of law. He didn't replace one system with another on the same level, albeit a superior one. No moral code, liturgy, or prescription of ritual could contain his covenant. Any attempt to shove the New Covenant into the same structure of the Old would fail, bursting the container and spilling the contents. One cannot patch up the Old Covenant with some moral teachings, nor can one store true morality in a vessel of laws. Jesus' lesson to the bewildered Pharisee/disciples of John suffices for our warning: don't attempt to ritualize the covenant of grace.

If the wine represents the New Covenant, then what is the new wineskin? We can use a parallel analogy to start our thinking. If the old wine represented the law, then the old wineskin was the realm in which law could exist. That realm dealt with the tangible, the concrete, and the observable. It dealt with externals, that is, things and what people do with things (Col. 2:22, Heb. 9:1-10, etc.). It dealt with jugs and houses and trees and animals. It dealt with how long you could keep a slave, and what would happen if someone committed adultery or practiced sorcery. The law could only exist in the realm of the humanly observable and measurable; it could not deal with intangibles such as *motivation, values, attitudes, and intentions*.

### **A new realm of spirituality**

The realm of the intangibles, therefore, is the realm of the New Covenant. It is the realm where God sees into the heart (I Sam. 16:7). The New Covenant, based on grace, cannot fit into an old wineskin. We cannot measure Grace anymore than we can measure a person's faith. We can see a good work, but we don't know the motivation. We can measure behavior, but not intention. We can make rules about tangible items such as clothes and food and animals, but sin or righteousness cannot reside in those (Rom. 14:17).

The New Covenant must live in a wineskin that has room for all its imponderables and ambiguities. It is not the wineskin of the observable and measurable; it is the wineskin of the mind of God, searching the deep things of our hearts with unimpeachable exactitude (Heb. 4:12). It is the realm where only He, the Creator, can judge, not with human eyes or ears, but with righteousness (Isa. 11:3-4).

So we find that the New Covenant must go into a new wineskin. It's not just a better set of laws or commands, but something of a higher order altogether, a new dispensation requiring a new way of ascertaining godliness. The Old Covenant dealt primarily in two realms: the physical world of objects and things, and the measurable and observable world of human behavior. The New Covenant abides in the realm of character and values and attitudes, intangible to humans, but known perfectly by God. The Old Covenant asks the question, "*What did you do?*" The New Covenant asks, "*Who are you?*"

## Levels of Measurement

We can assign levels of importance to our human experience. Imagine a four-story building with a basement. Each floor up represents a higher level of importance of our existence. We'll start in the basement, which really doesn't represent anything about us *per se*, but about our environment -- where we live, the ecclesia to which we belong, our home, our workplace, etc. Not actually part of the living area of the house itself, the bottom level represents all those people and things which we contact daily. Our surroundings affect us, but we aren't our environment.

### First floor – behavior

The first floor represents what we do, our behavior. This level only represents our actions, not anything concerning our motives for doing what we do. The sinner and the Pharisee about whom Jesus told the parable exhibited the same behavior in the same place; both prayed at the temple (Luke 18: 10). Likewise, two people can attend meeting (same behavior and environment) but have vastly different thoughts. However, at this first level of the house, we're only talking about observable behavior: where we go, what we do at work, what we do at home, etc.

### Second floor – knowledge

Let's go up to the second floor, which represents our knowledge. Knowledge comes from life's experiences as well as our Biblical and secular studies. We learn in many ways, and we can become greatly learned, but yet not do much with what we learn. Again, at this level we're only talking about our knowledge, that is, what we know.

Knowledge *can* change our behavior, but it doesn't always. Many people have learned, for instance, that smoking is bad for their health, but they continue the behavior of smoking. Spiritually, we all do things from time to time we know are wrong. Bible knowledge gives us the possibility of better spiritual lives, but it's not the whole of spiritual living. However, we still have two more floors to go.

### Third floor – attitudes

Ascending another flight, we come to the level that represents attitudes, values, and beliefs. These come from our knowledge also, but at this level knowledge has taken hold in our minds. The difference between *knowing* something, and truly *believing* something comes when we have personalized that knowledge through experience. For instance, the Bible teaches us to use forgiveness to repair interpersonal wrongs (e.g., Col. 3:13). We've all read this dozens of times. Yet, until we have experienced through forgiveness the restoration of a damaged relationship, it remains an academic issue. All of our faith remains academic until we act on it, experience it, and find its place in our lives. This is why our many powerful beliefs come not from book learning, but from personal experience. Have you ever tried to talk sense about the devil to someone who believes they have personally encountered the devil? In both positive and negative ways, we live out our beliefs about ourselves, God, and the world in which we live.

If we have negative experiences at an early age, we may have beliefs about ourselves and the world that make it very hard for us to function. Some people have experiences

that make it very hard for them to trust others, or to trust God. Some people have never experienced love and affection. They may read and learn about these ideas, or know that other people experience them, but find it very hard to relate to the ideas themselves. So we want to nourish each other, especially our children, with positive experiences congruent with God's love for us, and our love for God.

### **Fourth floor – identity**

The top floor of our house represents what we could call the sum (though it's really more than that) of our beliefs, values, and attitudes. We call this level our *identity*. Identity holds the most strategic position in our minds, and will have more impact on our behavior than any single belief or bit of information. We can think of ourselves as "*a child of God*," or "*a disciple*." Or, we can think of ourselves as "*a loser*," or as "*a victim*." Our identity shifts slowly, and is far more than the sum of what we do and where we do it. Someone once remarked, "*We are human beings, not human doings*."

Whatever we think of ourselves will guide our lives. God sees us at this level, as He does not measure our behavior or even our attitudes separately. He only sees a whole: a sheep or a goat. There's no such thing, in God's eyes, as "*a pretty good goat*," or a "*not-so-good-sheep*." He judges, completely and ineffably, at the identity level. Either we are disciples, or we are not. Identity is the most important force in determining our lives. Even more important, God's assessment of our identity will determine our eternal destiny.

### **All factors interact**

Obviously, all these levels interact with each other; we do have stairs leading up and down in our house. As our knowledge changes, so can our beliefs, and so should our behavior. Also, changes in behavior can lead to new beliefs. For instance, if you practice a skill, such as public speaking, until you master it, you might develop a new belief about your efficacy as a teacher. You might move from "*I hate giving talks*" to "*I love to build others up through the spoken word*" by practicing that behavior. Knowledge of the principles of preparing and delivering a talk can help shape the behavior, which in turn can help shape one's attitude. Conversely, a negative experience (which could be at the environmental or behavioral level) giving a public address could adversely change one at the attitudinal level.

### **The two wineskins**

What does all this have to do with wineskins? The Old Covenant dealt only with the two lower levels: what one did, and where one did it. It had no basis of relationship to values and motivation and identity. Only the wineskin of the New Covenant can accommodate the higher levels. This is not to say that the lower levels are of no importance; however, they only have importance relative to the attitudes which dictated them.

Moving from the Old Covenant to the New requires not only an appreciation of the higher levels, but the realization that we can't move them down to the first floor or the basement. In other words, to live in the New Covenant, we need to live in the less tangible world of values and attitudes, and search for a personal identity congruent

with the values of the Kingdom of God. We must not attempt to ritualize our faith, or think that we can assess anyone's faith by what we observe in their lives.

# 13

## Works of Faith or a Faith of Works?

*Behavior.* What does that word mean to you? Does it seem to require a descriptor, such as "good" or "bad?" The word "behavior" usually comes with an adjective letting us know if the behavior is acceptable or not acceptable, good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate, juvenile or adult, and so on. We seldom use this word without a qualifier to label the behavior. Like the word "weather," it seems incomplete without a descriptor. The term "behavior" by itself may seem strange to many of us.

For this article, however, we want to consider this word in just this manner. We want to consider behavior itself -- not good or bad behavior, but the concept of behavior. Behavior refers to our actions, our deeds, our comings and goings; it simply means what we do. Behavior is the visible and measurable part of our existence. Standing, walking, talking, sitting; anything physical that we do comes in the category of behavior. Behavior includes little doings, like "smiling," and large comprehensive categories, like "going to meeting," which in itself comprises many smaller behaviors.

### Emotions, motives are not behaviors

Behaviors normally have thoughts and emotions associated with them, but the thoughts and emotions themselves are not behaviors. Thinking "I'm lonely" is not a behavior, nor is feeling sad; that's an emotion. But crying is a behavior. The three go together, the thought, the emotion, and the behavior, but we can only see the behavior.

Moving on to a religious context, we note that ritual observances are, of necessity, behaviors. Works are also behaviors, such as tithing or preaching or singing praise to God. All works are behaviors. Again, in this sense we don't mean good behavior or bad behavior -- just an action, a behavior. Something done with the body, something that someone can see and measure. We can't know what people think or feel when they do acts of service or worship; only God knows the heart. Because we can only observe the tangible aspects of being (that is, the behavior rather than the attendant thoughts) we readily reduce great issues like religion and morality to strictly behavioral terms. We think of righteousness as "doing good" and "obedience," and we look for behavioral manifestations of our faith, such as giving or preaching or going to meeting. We elevate behavior to the level of faith because that's all we can see. Yet God sees the heart from which the behavior comes.

A good deal of the New Testament addresses this issue, namely, "*at what level does God measure righteousness?*" Jesus said, "*Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven*" (Mt. 5:20 NKJV). How can anyone exceed the punctilious righteousness of the Pharisees? Paul said that he was "*as to the law, blameless*" (Phil. 3:6). How can anyone exceed blamelessness? Obviously, we look for the answer in another area than ritual observance.

We can exceed legalistic righteousness two ways. In the context of Jesus' words, our righteousness extends beyond behavior into *thinking*. If adultery (a behavior) is sin, the higher righteousness even calls the thought of lust sin (Mt. 5:28). So, to exceed the Pharisees in matters of morality, we must avoid sin at the thought level, not just the behavior level.

### **Paul doesn't command giving**

Now let's look at another example, one from the positive (doing good) realm, as opposed to avoiding evil. For instance, tithing is a good idea, but the behavior itself means nothing. We must give with a willing heart. Paul expended much ink on this issue in II Corinthians (8:1-9:15). He wouldn't command the Corinthians to give (II Cor. 8:8). He didn't make a rule that they must give any set amount or percentage of their assets, because the behavior of giving wouldn't yield righteousness. Their attitude alone would determine God's view of their giving. Thus, Jesus and Paul taught that the way our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees comes not in outdoing them in good works, but in having a basis of righteous thinking from which the behavior emanates. The Pharisees, working under the system of law, could only *measure* behavior. God looks at the *intent* that drives the behavior.

The last example -- that of giving -- provides an ideal opportunity for showing the difference between *behavior* and *attitude*. If all that mattered was the actual giving of a tithe or any specified amount, then Paul would have instructed the Corinthians to give the money, period. He could have commanded their obedience. But what Paul wanted to know was: did the Corinthians really love their brothers and sisters in famine-struck Judea? (II Cor. 8:8,24). Would they give without being commanded?

Would they be truly glad to give, and count it an honor? Or would some only give because everyone else did and they felt ashamed not to? Would some take pride in the amount of their donation? Paul left much of this territory unaddressed. He only exhorted them to stir up their generosity, and then he let them act as their consciences directed them.

The nature of the situation made Paul's non-directive approach even more thought-provoking. Famine relief had immediate practical application. The issue at hand meant meeting a basic need for the saints in Judea who had suffered from the famine prophesied by Agabus (Acts 11:28-30). This wasn't an issue of ecclesial policy or worship practices. This could well have been a life or death matter for the recipient ecclesias. They really needed the behavior of giving to happen. Still, Paul wouldn't command it. He would only exhort and appeal to their spiritual conscience, because if he made it a command, then love could no longer occur. Once we have a law, behavior takes precedence (because laws only deal with behavior), and motivation becomes immaterial. So even in this dire situation, when Paul probably wanted so

much to raise funds for the suffering Judean ecclesias, he still deferred to the greater work of God in giving the Corinthians the chance to show their love.

So Paul refrained. He typified God Himself, giving people the option to make the right choice of their own accord. Sure, giving is good, and giving a lot is better. But once it becomes a standard, a law, or a rule, then love can no longer operate. Attitude becomes irrelevant. Only the behavior itself would matter.

## **Behavior and attitude**

The point we want to focus on now concerns the differentiation between behaviors as a category and thoughts and attitudes as another category. For now we want to omit considering whether the behavior is "*good*" or "*bad*;" we'll get to that shortly. We want to make sure we understand the difference between what comes under "*behavior*" and what comes under "*attitude*."

Tithing is a behavior. Loving your brother enough to give is an attitude. We can see and measure the act of giving. We can't see or measure the attitude behind it. We can know (although we ought not) if someone gives money. We can't know anyone's motivation for giving; sometimes we don't even know our own attitudes. We can make a rule that says "*you must tithe*." We can't make a rule that says, "*You must be a willing giver*."

Why shouldn't we make rules that specify appropriate actions if they're good activities? Why can't we specify attitude as well as behavior? Why can't we make willingness a rule? The answers to these questions will help us understand the nature of faith under the New Covenant and how it differed from the Old Covenant.

Let's suppose for a moment we did have a rule that specified we must tithe. If tithing is good, why not have this rule? Then everyone would do the good behavior, and we'd all accrue righteousness, yes? NO! Because if we make a rule, then we have eliminated the possibility of doing good as an expression of our faith and love. Once we make a rule, we have removed the possibility of free-will from the equation. We have short-circuited love. We have killed motivation. We have replaced the New Covenant with the old, because we have gone back to the realm of behavior. We have substituted the pseudo-righteousness of works.

## **Law or free will?**

So why not take the next step and legislate love? Why not improve the rule of "*giving*" to a rule for "*willingly give*." Two reasons. One, as we have just said, the presence of the external law to give precludes the possibility of true willingness. If you have been told to do something, then you can't think of doing something of your own free will. For instance, if you tell your children to wash the dishes, can they possibly now do it of their own free will? No, because the command to do a task takes free will out of the picture. They can obey your request, but they can't show voluntary free will. They either obey or they don't; the matter now no longer concerns love or initiation.

But can't someone willingly follow a command? Can't the children willingly and cheerfully wash the dishes according to your request? Yes, they can willingly obey,

but they can't offer, because you have asked them to do it. That's the key difference. If we have a rule that asks for money, we can't give of our own accord.

The second reason you can't legislate love is because there is no way to measure it. How would you measure attitude? How would you measure or quantify willingness? Look for a smile on someone's face? That's back to behavior. We can neither detect nor legislate attitude. It must come from a heart touched by God's love. A good attitude will produce good works.

Taking this one step further, we can see what would happen if we tried to regulate the attitude, also. In other words, what if Paul had said to the Corinthians, "*You must give much money, and you must do so with a willing heart.*" Can anyone command a willing heart? If one has a willing heart, he doesn't need the command; if one has not a willing heart, no command can make it willing. It's plainly lose-lose to attempt to command attitude. You can't create attitude on command, and if you could, it wouldn't be the right attitude anyway. (God willing, we'll discuss John 15:12 and others -- an apparent contradiction to this thesis -- in a future article.)

We do not say that following commands cannot show faith, for Hebrews 11 lists several acts of obedience, all done by faith. Abraham left Ur -- at God's command -- by faith. This was not his initiative; it was God's. Hebrews does tell us that Abraham's motivation came through faith; we would not otherwise know this. Had we lived at the time of Abraham, and knew that he left Ur at God's command, we would only know that he obeyed, but we could not assess his faith. We could see the behavior -- leaving Ur -- but not the inner workings of the heart. (That is why we cannot ever judge the faithfulness of one who does something apparently godly, or the unfaithfulness of one who fails in the same mission). We can only observe the behavior, but we can't judge the motivation behind the behavior.

The basic principles of love, commitment, service, humility, and faith should suffice for generating our behaviors, initiated and given freely. The more God leaves us with guidelines instead of directives, principles instead of commands, the more we can display our faith, our love and our spiritual maturity. God allows us to struggle that we might develop character rather than mindlessly follow rules for behavior's sake.

### **A faith of works, or works of faith?**

James clearly delivers the message: the attitude of faith really doesn't exist unless it manifests itself behaviorally. We must show our faith by our doings. Faith cannot exist at the attitude level only, it must show itself really where it counts -- doing something. This is where behavior counts, but as humans, we can never judge a person's faith by their doings. God respects the behaviors of faith, and only He can ineffably distinguish them from their counterfeit counterparts.

On the other hand, if we establish the behaviors as necessary and mandatory, then we have reversed the Bible's admonition. When we make the behaviors themselves laws (in our day, known as "*rules, standards, codes of conduct, etc.*") we have reverted to the Old Covenant. We can no longer exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees because we have returned to their level.

That's why we took all this time to discuss behavior as a concept, not as good or bad behavior, but just as the category of behavior. If we would live by faith, we need to

have a clear appreciation that what we do stems from our faith, and our doing does not suffice alone or as some addition to our faith. Nor is this at all a matter of balance; we don't believe for a moment that somehow faith and works compete with each other. You either have both, or neither. If you count works as faith, you have neither. If you have a faith that develops from a relationship with the Creator, you will have an abundance of both.

# 14

## Judgement, Sin and Righteousness

Last month's article addressed the difference between the concepts of behavior and the attitudes which beget the behaviors. Legalism focuses on behavior because we can observe and measure behavior but not the attitudes behind it. God, however, sees our hearts and measures our faith at a level unknowable to humans. Now, let's apply this background to a consideration of sin and righteousness.

First, here's a one-question quiz to help you assess your own thinking on this subject. The question concerns your understanding of the judgment.

*Do you think that some people will just barely make it (or not) into the Kingdom? In other words, do you think there will be any "tough calls" at the Judgment seat of Christ?*

### Considering the judgment

God judges the heart and knows immediately if we belong to Him or not (John 10:14). He sees sheep and goats, wise and foolish, servants and imposters. It's either *"Enter into the joy of your master"* or *"I never knew you."* Nobody gets a lukewarm, *"Sorry, but you just missed. You're not as bad as the truly evil, but you're not quite up to my entrance requirements."*

Now, of course, we don't judge anyone, but we do have an impression of how the judgment might occur. We might think that for some, acceptance or rejection at the judgment would be a *"close call."* Not in the sense that Jesus would have to think it over for a while, but in the sense that a person's life would have fairly equal amounts of good and evil.

Just how is it that we err towards legalism if we think that some people have marginal qualifications for the Kingdom? Gradient thinking only comes by using legalistic measures. It comes when we have a paradigm of judgment that looks like a balance sheet, with debits and credits. If the credits and debits seem about the same, we can imagine an *"iffy"* situation regarding judgment. One might have many good works, but a few big bad ones to offset them. Or, one might have many evils and try desperately to balance them out by doing good works rather than believing that God can erase them through forgiveness.

## Evaluating behavior

Let's look at a couple of hypothetical examples. A brother has spotty attendance at meeting and seldom does anything extra for the ecclesia. You know that he has a full schedule of non-ecclesial involvements, sports activities for the children, hobbies and vacation travels. Yet, he's always warm and friendly and sounds so sincere when he says something in class. You wonder if he really values the Kingdom first in his life. If he makes it, you think, it won't be by much.

Now consider a sister who has always been one of the most active people in the ecclesia. She's always involved, her home is the center of young people's activities, she contributes to every ecclesial project, and every summer she volunteers to cook at camp and teach children's classes at Bible school. You think she's a certainty for the kingdom until you find out that earlier in her life she had a child out of wedlock whom she gave up for adoption. Now you're not so sure about her.

In these examples, we listed the behavior of an imaginary brother and sister. However, we did not say anything about their faith, because we cannot. Only God can judge faith. We only see behaviors, which we call "*works*." If we see many good works and few bad works, we might think someone will be in the Kingdom. If we see a strange mixture, we wonder.

But the "*credit*" and "*debit*" system has no place in the New Covenant. (It never really did in the Old Covenant, either). God never had a system where He weighed our "*good works*" against our "*sins*." In God's justice, He looks at our faith (Hab. 2:4; Eph. 2:8,9). If we have faith that He forgives our sins, then we have no debits (Psa. 103:12; see also Psa. 32, 51, 65). If we don't believe that He really does forgive, then we are left to believe that somehow God retains our sins and weighs them against our "*good works*."

If we have faith, we have forgiveness. If we have forgiveness, we have no debt of sin. If we have no debt of sin, we have a clear conscience toward God and a place in His Kingdom at our Lord's return.

We are either wholly in or wholly out, because that's the way the New Covenant of grace operates. There aren't any "*close calls*," because close calls could only come from an imaginary paradigm of balancing good and bad works.

## Counting sin

Does reliance on grace not amount to "*let us sin that grace may abound?*" We hope no one will see it that way. However, the possibility of that conclusion led Paul to exclaim, "*By no means!*" (Rom. 6:2). We have many Scriptures to help us direct our lives away from sin and toward holiness. We made the point that God forgives on the basis of our faith in Him to do so. We also, by that same faith, generate our lives of holiness. Flawed creatures that we are, we need both operations of faith.

Even if we direct our lives toward holiness, we will still sin. But how does one count sin, anyway? What constitutes a "*sin*"? We can find a few Scriptural definitions of sin, but then we need to take those definitions into the realm of life. "*All that is not of faith, is sin,*" wrote Paul (Rom. 14:23). "*Sin is lawlessness,*" wrote John (I John 3: 4).

How do these statements guide us to a working definition, something we can relate to daily life? How can we derive a definition of sin that is pragmatic *and* theological?

We can start with a simple analysis. Sin has two components, the thought and the deed (Gen. 3:6; Josh. 7:21; Mt. 15:19,20). We sometimes see people's deeds of sin. We never see the thought. The deed is the child of the thought. We think evil, and then do evil (Micah 2:1-2). When we get really good at sinning, we can bypass the think stage. Then we have a habituated sinful response, sin-on-the-shelf waiting for the occasion.

So how, then, does God count sin? Do we sin as soon as we *think* something sinful and relish the thought, or does it only count when we actually carry it out? If we don't carry it out, do we need to seek forgiveness for the sinful thought? Jesus taught us that harboring sin in the heart was sin, even without the corresponding deed (Mt. 5:21-28). God doesn't have to see the work of sin. Unlike faith, which must have the corresponding work to prove itself (James 2:17), sin stands guilty in the mind of its owner even before it begets its evil offspring of sinful deed.

We could say that every time we think something sinful, we need forgiveness. Every lust, every jealousy, every moment of envy or anger or resentment or hate or prejudice requires our awareness, our prayer for forgiveness, and our commitment afresh to a better way. However, even considering every evil thought, even adding in the partially offensive thoughts, or the mildly reproachful, we still wouldn't come close to cataloguing our repertoire of sinful thinking. Why not? Because we have only taken into consideration thus far the sins of commission. By far our larger deficit carries the label *sins of omission*.

## **Sins of omission**

A sin of omission happens when we don't do something bad, but could have done better in a situation. Now, what would be the thinking behind the sins of omission? If sin has two parts, the thought and the ensuing deed, then we must look for a corresponding pair in a sin of omission. But we may have trouble locating the engendering thought, because it's the *lack* of thought that leads to sins of omission. Remember, Jesus elevated the New Covenant paradigm of sin and righteousness above the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. We don't consider doing a "*bad work*" as the full measure of sin any more than we consider a "*good work*" as righteousness. We're looking at another level of measurement altogether, that of the mind. So when we consider sins of omission, we face a challenge to our understanding, namely, how can we sin when nothing at all happened? Can we be guilty of sin when we have done nothing wrong or even had a wrong thought? Absolutely yes, and the realization of this circumstance is a watershed issue in our maturity in Christ.

I recall years ago a young brother in a Bible discussion saying, "*But what if you haven't sinned that day?*" Clearly, his understanding of sin at that time included only sins of commission, and probably big bad ones at that. He would grow into a day when he would chortle at that statement. He would learn that the definition of sin includes far more than doing something wrong. He would learn how much good he could have done, had he had the awareness to do so.

## Failing to do what we could

Let's take a simple example. You put money in the collection on Sunday. "*Good for me,*" you might think. If you think you have any merit because of this, you've essentially gone back under the law. That's a sin of attempted justification by works, and an act of pride. But what if you didn't think "*good for me,*" or anything like that. What if you thought, "*God gives to me, and I give back.*" That's better, but who knows what attitude is really lurking behind that? God knows. Let's say He finds you pure even at that level, and wholly congruent in your act of love.

But why didn't you put two or three times that amount into the collection? Did you not think of that? Did it not occur to you that you could do so? If you could have, but didn't, then that's an omission. The omission is what we haven't yet grown up to in Christ. Now we're getting at the main theology of sin in the New Covenant. It's not so much what we've done amiss, but what we haven't yet done or even thought of doing, but *could* be doing.

Omissions come when we don't preach, when we don't make the opportunity to preach, when we don't prepare ourselves to preach, when we don't give freely, lend freely, help freely, love freely, serve freely. The sin of omission, though, occupies an even larger domain than specific behaviors. It also includes failing to take steps to increase our faith. The greatest sin of omission lies not in the specific lack of any certain act or deed, it lies in our failure to become whom we ought to be in Christ. (This concept, familiarly known as "*Spiritual Growth,*" will occupy an upcoming article, Lord willing.)

For now, we note the basic redefinition of the idea of sin as we move from law to grace. Law defined right and wrong behavior. Sin meant violating the code. This could mean failing to do a necessary ritual, but more commonly it meant doing a prohibited action. Under grace, we move from the behavioral and tangible world to the realm of values, thoughts, and beliefs. Sins of commission now have labels such as "*lust,*" "*envy,*" "*pride,*" "*judging,*" and "*party spirit.*"

Sins of omission, in terms of the New Covenant, don't have a crisply defined category. Scripture says, "*All that is not of faith is sin.*" This means that we define sin in the context of faith, not law. Sin goes beyond breaking a commandment. It now includes failing to live according to faith; this emphasizes performance rather than avoidance. We have a view of sin that exceeds the scope of sin as defined by law.

Our view of sin must go beyond "*doing something bad.*" It must go past that, and beyond "*thinking something bad.*" It must even go beyond "*failing to do good.*" Our definition finally comes to rest at something like "*falling short in our quest to live in faith and love.*" This is not to say that if we do bad, we don't commit sin. Of course sin is still sin, adultery is still adultery, and lying is still lying. If we commit sin, we need to ask for forgiveness. We also need to appreciate the breach of faith that is the root of our sin. And what we need to see most is the growth of our faith, and realize that the greatest sin is the indifference and unawareness that stunts our spiritual growth. The question about life's activities and challenges we want to ask is not "*What's wrong with it?*" but "*What's right with it?*" Better yet ask, "*Is this consistent with the growth of my faith?*"

## **Repentance**

One more thought concerning the effects of using a legalist-based model of sin. If we do so, it abrogates our forgiveness, because we won't have near the awareness of sin that we ought. Let's follow the line of thought: If you don't sin, you don't need repentance, right? However, we believe we all sin, therefore we all need repentance. Sometimes we forget to move the theology of Romans 3:23 into the real-life prayer of repentance (e.g, Psa. 65:1-3). Shortcomings in repentance stem from the thinking that only overt sins of commission count as "*sin*."

It starts with a legalistic definition of sin: doing something wrong. We then need to know what not to do, so we make a list of bad things not to do. This is fairly easy, as the Bible has several such lists (e.g, I Cor. 6:9-10; Col. 3:5-8). We take these and pare away the entries that cover the intangibles of character which we can't see, like envy and greed. We keep the big baddies, like adultery and theft, drunkenness and cheating.

When we avoid these, we feel good about ourselves. We aren't sinners like other people. We can even make another list of things of which we don't approve. This list might include watching TV, going to certain movies, or drinking alcoholic beverages. If we don't do those either, we don't sin. Now we are speaking hypothetically, of course, but also demonstrating the real-life danger of a legalist definition of sin. It is putting new wine into an old wineskin. If you go through a whole day of not doing anything wrong (in your limited view of "*wrong*"), then you have no perceived need of repentance. And if you don't repent, you won't receive forgiveness because you didn't ask for forgiveness.

Rather than list activities to avoid, list characteristics to develop. Then, when you realize at the end of each day that you still have a long way to go, you'll have no trouble finding the right mindset to seek and receive the forgiveness we all need to stand before our God.

## **Righteousness**

We titled this article Sin and Righteousness, but thus far we've only talked about sin. Righteousness doesn't take much space, as we don't have any. However, God counts our faith as righteousness (Rom. 4:5); moreover, this passage comes in the context of forgiveness. One aspect of our faith is the firm belief that God forgives our sins. Paul also quotes here from Psalm 32, which refers to King David's nefarious assassination of Uriah. God does forgive the worst of sins, and Paul places this teaching directly in the midst of his discussion of Abraham's faith. For purposes of our present discussion, we would emphasize that aspect of faith that sees God as the forgiver of all our sins, omitted and committed, thought and deed.

## **Summary**

A legalistic definition of sin focuses on behaviors, mainly avoidance behaviors. A working definition of sin consistent with the New Covenant focuses on the higher levels of attitude and identity. We move from the realm of avoidance to development, from behavior to values. We define our shortcomings not so much as what we did wrong, but what we didn't do right because we didn't become the person whom Jesus desires. Development of character, not avoidance of bad behavior, becomes the focus of our morality.

Righteousness, likewise, does not come from successfully avoiding any specific bad behavior or list of bad behaviors. Nothing we do can avail righteousness; it must come from the higher level of values, principally faith. The recognition that God looks at our faith alone allows us to receive His grace. Entrance into the Kingdom requires spiritual development, but grace, not our own doings, saves us.

# 15

## Hast Thou Considered Job

What's an article about Job doing in a series about legalism? Didn't he have enough problems without an expositor accusing him of legalism? Job teaches us about suffering and patience and the magnitude of God. Where does legalism come in? It comes in the theological perspective that led to his problems. Not just Job, but Bildad, Zophar, and Eliphaz all had the same highly legalistic theology. In fact, the entire thesis of the book hangs on that background. As we will see, the connection between legal righteousness and material well-being forms the basis of the whole drama. We will also see in Job a prefiguring of the Apostle Paul, who also learned to eschew his legalistic righteousness.

### Assuming the historicity of Job

While we assume Job was a real historical person, the setting of the book itself demands we understand it as a dramatization. People don't converse in the poetic language of Job and his three friends. The language of the three reads as drama, not actual human discourse. Another aspect of "unreality" comes right in the opening words: the description of Job as "*blameless and upright*." This is counter to what we know about human nature. However, to get the theological import of the book, we must take the descriptions of Job, and his own accounts of his righteousness, at face value. If we, like Job's friends, go fishing for sin on his part, we fall into the same legalistic trap of "*exact retribution*." It demeans the whole point of Job's suffering.

So, while accepting the historical reality of the book, we read it as a poetic parable of a blameless man who suffers greatly, yet fails to find reason for his devastation.

### Blameless Job suffers

We meet Job with the description of a "*blameless and upright man, who feared God and turned away from evil*" (Job 1:1). This is the narrator's voice, not Job himself -- at this point. The calamities that befall this blameless individual cover everything but his wife. Successive losses take away his wealth, his children, his health. By implication, and from evidence later in the book, he also loses his reputation and community standing (30:1, 9-10). Worst of all, Job loses his understanding of God. Later, of course, that will become a blessing. For the moment, it is his utter devastation. "*A man's spirit will endure sickness, but a broken spirit, who can bear?*" (Prov. 18:14).

Anyone who has gone through a crisis of faith, when nothing about God seemed to make sense anymore, can appreciate Job's misery. Of all his multitudinous ills, the worst, and therefore the focus of the book, is his desperate attempt to regain his understanding of God. Job cannot explain what has happened to him. He knows that God has struck him down without cause. This simply cannot be. Job's theological wrestlings displace much of his mourning and physical suffering.

Three of his friends come quickly to help. Appalled to the point of speechlessness at his misery (2:13), for a week they give the best of their ministrations -- silent empathy. Then, unfortunately, they start to talk. Unskilled helpers that they are, they make the fatal pastoral error of offering advice and theological explanation to one in great suffering. Not ones to offer verbal compassion and support, they attempt to solve Job's misery by setting him straight concerning providence and sin. They think "*correct theology*" will enlighten Job, and thus remove his misery. (If this sounds familiar, learn, and don't do likewise!)

Their strategy exacerbated rather than alleviated Job's suffering. Now he had another grief to suffer -- no one understood his plight. It was enough to lose his wealth, his health, and his family; now he had to endure it without any compassion or support. Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar had only one agenda, and it had no therapeutic value.

### **Exact retribution**

The three friends understood the theology of suffering at the level Job did. All four believed in the classic legalistic paradigm of rules, rituals, and rewards. They all believed that if one did right, then God owed that person blessing -- now, in this life for God rewards the upright and punishes the wicked. Wealth and well-being surely marked the upright.

Jesus' disciples believed this way also. That's why the gospels record the disciples' "*exceeding astonishment*" at Jesus' teaching about the difficulty of a rich man entering the Kingdom (Mark 10:23-26). If a rich man -- obviously blessed for his piety -- could hardly enter the Kingdom, who could? Before his calamities, Job fit that description ideally. Here we had the blameless and upright Job, who enjoyed the blessings of God beyond any of his comrades, with his vast wealth, family, and prestige. He had it all because he earned it all, so they thought.

While all four would have agreed on how God works, and why Job had previously accrued great temporal blessing, the three disagreed with Job as to the nature of his current circumstance. Driven by the inevitable logic of their legalist theology of reward and punishment, they readily concluded the obvious explanation: Job had sinned. They hardly needed to marshal any direct evidence; would not any one of Job's multiple calamities suffice for a guilty verdict?

Job, however, seeing the whole drama from the inside, refuses to admit culpability. He maintains Almighty God has smitten him without cause (e.g. 9:21). The three friends find this untenable. "*You must have sinned,*" they repeatedly aver. Job continues in his denials, saying that he is totally at a loss to come up with any explanation of the Almighty's blast.

We can simplify the first three-quarters of the book of Job as follows:

*Three friends:* Job, you sinned and God is punishing you.  
*Job:* No I didn't; I don't know why He's punishing me.  
*Three friends:* Yes you did.  
*Job:* No I didn't.  
*Three friends:* Yes you did!  
*Job:* No I didn't!

All four, enmeshed in the same paradigm of exact retribution, differ only on the issue of Job's culpability. For the three friends, the answer to the dilemma lies in Job's admitting he sinned. Job dismisses this option, having no sin to admit. For Job, the solution to the dilemma must come with an explanation of why the Almighty would reduce Job to the dust heap for no reason (9:17-24).

As Job nears the end of his self-vindication, he lists all his good deeds (ch. 29) and all the sins that he eschewed (ch. 31). In chapter 29, Job describes the esteem he had in the community, and enumerates his righteous deeds: "*I delivered the poor when he cried...I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame, a father to the poor.*" Then, after an interlude bemoaning his current blighted state, he categorically denies having done any sin (ch. 31). In these two sections, he covers both sins of omission and commission; he's innocent of both. He never mistreated his servants, coveted someone else's wife, or walked with falsehood. He upholds his sexual morality, honesty, benevolence, truthfulness, single-minded worship of God, and generosity. He eschews adultery, idolatry, greed, covetousness, lying, vengeance, penury, and harshness.

We take these self-reports at face value regarding their accuracy. The story requires this perspective, as Job's entire dilemma comes from God's breaking him without cause. If Job has a flaw or a misdeed, then he has the explanation for his troubles. However, he is a righteous man, and he can prove it.

Therein lies the problem -- Job's measuring system. Nothing in his catalogue of chapters 29 & 31 mentions faith. Nowhere does he trust in the Almighty for his justification. Nowhere does he regard his deeds as just his reasonable service, with no obligation put on his Maker. Nowhere does he even hint at the possibility of some imperfection or limitation or need for improvement. He does not recognize his inherent dependence on God and plea for his Maker's mercy. In other words, Job's self-report, while accurate, reflects a mindset of self-justification by works. If anyone could boast in the law, it was Job. It is precisely this character that Almighty God must use to prove to all of us that "*by works of the law shall no man be justified.*" His criteria for righteousness is entirely self-created; he had become his own God. Job's dilemma therefore displays the weakness of the legalistic system: even a righteous man cannot bring his own salvation. He can't even make this present life a blessing. Fully righteous, and fully devastated, Job sat in the ash-heap of his theology.

## The resolution

The resolution of Job's theological vexation would not come in the uncovering of some secret sin to explain why God smote him. Neither would it come in the attribution of a general state of sin, or sin nature. It would not come in some mystical explanation of God's nature that repaid good with evil. It would come in the reversing of Job's model of rules and rewards. Job had to learn that ritualistic righteousness, even moral righteousness, as he proclaimed for himself, could never suffice to guarantee a life of blessing.

Why not? Why can't we expect God to bless us when we do right? What's the point of doing right if eventually God blasts us anyway? Even sinners of basest rank never had it so bad as Job. What's the deal?

Three major reasons teach us why legalism cannot suffice for salvation or guarantee temporal blessing:

1. ***Legalism reverses the roles of judging and blessing.*** Instead of God judging and giving us blessing, we become the controllers of our blessing, and God gets judged. This happened precisely in Job's case. Job felt God owed him blessing, and when God delivered evil, Job judged God! (e.g., Job 10:2-7).
2. ***Legalism takes love out of the equation.*** When we introduce the expectancy of reward for doing right, we remove the possibility of love. We can no longer do good simply because it's the right thing to do; we have the reward factor ever lurking to sully our motives.
3. ***Legalism would create an impossible world.*** Just take Job's theology and run it out. Suppose that all blessing accrued to the holy, and the sinners received swift and certain punishment. So someone falls sick -- you know they sinned. Someone cuts their finger making dinner; perhaps they just sinned a little. Someone's house burns -- big, bad sin. At least this sort of world would make it easy to know who sinned! If someone in your ecclesia got cancer, you would disfellowship him, rather than support him, because he had to be a horrible sinner.

So all good Christadelphians would always come to meeting on Sunday, for fear of what might happen if they didn't. What if they took a Sunday off because they felt a little bad? What if God thought they should have gone to meeting? Zap. Flu for sure, for missing meeting.

Your friends at work would ask you to travel with them, because they knew that good Christadelphians never got in accidents. Others would want to go to your church -- not because they believed God's promises, but because they knew it was a safe bet. Eventually they would ostracize you for being someone possessed of a magical spirit, because nothing bad ever happened to you.

Finally, how could God chasten those whom He loves? He would have to wait until they sinned big, so the teaching would come on their schedule, not His. Keep going with this line of thinking and you'll eventually realize how utterly absurd a world we would live in if, in fact, Almighty God did employ exact retribution.

We could go on, but by now the point should stand as obvious. A world based on the exact retribution postulated by Job and friends would be an impossibility. All we have to do is extend their model to see that it cannot possibly work. Curiously, this does not stop people from believing in it, as exact retribution abides to this day in various forms. Every time you think a person's suffering directly relates to a sin, you keep this form of legalism alive.

We don't mean to preach randomness and happenstance occurrences. All things come under God's control. Job did not suffer randomly or maliciously. He suffered to show that life cannot hold any one-to-one correlation between sin and suffering, or rules and rewards.

So Job, Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar needed a new model to explain the suffering of the righteous. They needed a new model to understand providential interventions. They needed to learn a lesson in God's supremacy and wisdom. God can punish sin directly, and He also can have the righteous -- notably His own son -- suffer. God works with each of us according to His good will for our learning. This message would come from a fifth player in the drama, Elihu.

### **Elihu speaks**

After three cycles of vain arguing, another voice comes in, that of Elihu. The three friends speak no more, and Job only briefly. The last act of the drama focuses on Elihu and God. Elihu has apparently listened to the entire debate, though we don't know when he entered. Elihu faults all four men, and, in a lengthy speech, gets to the central issue. Unsheathing his theological sword upon the Gordian knot of legalistic retribution, he, for the first time, states that God's visiting evil upon men does not come because of their wickedness. Evil has a preventive, not punitive function. The purpose of calamity is not to send men to the pit, but to keep them from the pit (33:22, 28,30). Elihu preaches a God who does not repay evil with evil, but forgives sin. The kernel of Elihu's argument, in 33:26-30, addresses God's forgiveness, His chastening, and His good will toward sinners who confess. This contrasts starkly with Job's statement that God does not remit iniquity, but repays sin with evil (Job 10:14).

Although much of what Elihu says sounds like the same rhetoric as the others, his key points show that he saw into the realm of the spiritual regarding sin and suffering. Elihu correctly asserts that God respects the prayer of confession with forgiveness. He establishes the basis of salvation as confession, not legalistic righteousness (33:26-28).

Job and his friends lived with the working principle that suffering is the punishment for sin. Elihu says the purpose of suffering is to prevent sin, not punish sin. It has a didactic rather than adversarial origin. It shows God not as one who metes out punishment in accord with one's transgression, but a God who lovingly wounds us for our learning.

## Learning from suffering

What are we to learn from suffering? First, we learn dependence on God, and we see our life as completely in His hands. We learn that by works of the law shall no man be justified. We learn patience as we wait for the resolution, which may only come in the Kingdom. We learn to overcome adversity, and to increase the limits of our capabilities. We learn compassion for others who have calamities in life. We learn priorities, what's really important in life. Most important, we see suffering as a symbol for the dispensation of mortality, and thus place our hope in perfection of the Kingdom of God on earth.

All the above learning constitutes spirit-mindedness, and it doesn't come from following any set of codes or rituals. *Spiritual growth comes only from spiritual activity, and, alas, suffering is a primary spiritual activity, as it completely counters the flesh.* Job's spiritual development would have ceased had God not intervened in his life. To be sure, he was blameless and upright. He was full of charity and concern for others. However, he thought that because of these virtues, God owed him something. God was dependent on him, not vice versa. To demolish this erroneous concept, the Almighty almost had to demolish Job.

## Job and Paul

Paul's autobiographical notes in Philippians 3 lead us to an inevitable comparison with Job. Paul uses the very same word of himself, "*blameless*" (v.6). Like Job, he thought God owed him something, and God had to dismantle this perspective so Paul could serve him. Paul also suffered the "*loss of all things*" (v.8). Paul's losses compare with Job, even if they didn't come in quickly successive acts. Paul's conversion cost him his standing as Pharisee, his income, his health, and a family life. Eventually, it probably cost him his life. But Paul acknowledged that suffering, not rules and rituals, led to Christ-likeness; "*...that I may share in his sufferings, become like him in his death, that if possible, I may attain the resurrection of the dead*" (v.10-11). God brought great suffering on Paul: "*I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name*" (Acts 9:16). Through suffering the loss of all things, Paul learned to reject the "*righteousness of my own*" (v. 9; cp. Job 29, 31, and 32:2) in favor of the only true righteousness, that which comes from faith in the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

# 16

## Spiritual Growth

Previously we have looked at various aspects of faith as they contrasted with that same aspect under the law. For instance, we considered the topic of "sin" as understood in the covenant of grace versus sin in the legal realm. We have continued using this device of contrast because the Bible establishes the contrast and demands that we understand faith in its contradistinction from law.

However, the topic of spiritual growth has no counterpart in the legalist system. Just using the idea of spiritual growth removes us from the realm of law. We can only have spiritual growth in the covenant of grace. As we shall soon see, the idea of "growth" carries implications that cannot exist in a legal approach.

### Job's perspective

In the previous article, we noted that Job had a limited measuring system of righteousness. If he did right and eschewed evil, he was fine. Having done nothing wrong, he was righteous. By his own admission, he had no room for growth. Whatever God required of him, he did. His testimonies (chapters 29 & 31) lacked, as the last article pointed out, any reference to faith. He related to God not as a student to a teacher, but he envisioned God as a judge whose function was to reward Job for his righteous deeds. At the end of the book, Almighty God queried Job about his ability to create *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), and being found wanting in that category, Job learned something important: he didn't know much about God, after all. He knew much about the self-made God of his own creation, but he didn't know much about the one real God. His most important learning was this: he needed to be a learner and beneficiary. Humbled by the dramatic display of his human limitations versus the unlimited power of the Almighty, Job found the perspective of life he needed. No, a limited human could not expect to come up with a rational explanation of evil visited upon the "righteous." It could only come from the mind of the Eternal Creator.

Sometimes we can't see things, whether in life or in the scriptures. Sometimes we need years to learn a lesson of life or understand a passage of scripture. Nevertheless, that's our calling, *to learn and to grow*. Job's theology had it that one arrived at a state of acceptability, a status of goodness to which God responded with blessing. By dramatizing the vast chasm between the eternal wisdom and power of the Creator, and the minimal wisdom and minuscule power of the created, God set the perspective for Job, and for us. Job's problem wasn't that he was a bad person as his friends made

him out to be, but that he was incomplete. He didn't know his role -- one who would learn and seek help.

## The eternal quest for knowledge

We never come, as we unfortunately often hear, to a "*knowledge of the Truth*." Certainly, we understand basics of the gospel, and we become baptized in that belief. We proclaim the baptism to be a birth. If so, whence is the growth that comes afterwards? Does it ever stop? Do we ever really know enough about God and Jesus? Can that which is mortal ever truly say it knows all about the immortal? If we could fully understand God, would He really be God?

We understand that our knowledge is always incomplete, and therefore always growing. We seek more than just book knowledge, however; we desire the knowledge that builds faith and love. Of that knowledge we can never have enough. We need to grow, not in the sense that we need to know more to achieve some level, but because it is the process of growing itself that marks the disciple. The kingdom of heaven has neither a minimum entrance requirement nor a "*full*" line on some spiritual dipstick. To think either "*I need to know more*" or "*I already know enough*" means you have replaced spiritual growth with a legalist construct, especially because such statements invariably focus on academic Bible knowledge.

We should accept the truth of our need for lifelong learning, but not in the sense that we need to know more to "*get into the kingdom*." We do need the constant input of scripture, lest one's mind revert, as Robert Roberts so pungently stated, "*to its original swinishness*." If we think we know enough, we will quit learning, and then what knowledge we thought we had will erode, leaving us in our fleshly values and affections.

Another problem with thinking we know enough is that knowledge can block further learning. This "*knowledge barrier*" had particular application to the Pharisees. The Pharisees couldn't see the Messiah because they already knew about Messiah. "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" "*Is not he the carpenter's son?*" Because they "*knew*" all about Messiah, when Messiah came, they had no room for new learning. They left themselves no room for growth. The possibility of undiscovered truth was forever lost on them.

When we think we know, we close our minds to new options. *A closed mind gathers no new insights*, and ceases to grow. In that sense, we never come to a "*knowledge of the Truth*."

## Building on the past

Does this mean we periodically abandon our fundamentals in search of new teachings and new behavior? Not at all. Growth, whether natural or physical, builds on itself. By its very nature, spiritual growth continually builds on the spiritual foundations to increase our knowledge and performance as disciples. We do not look to jettison our past, but continually to refine and elaborate, standing on our own shoulders to reach further into the mind of the spirit. In nature an organism grows by expanding on its original genetic blueprint. Likewise, in the spirit we grow by expanding on God's blueprint, in an endless pattern that starts with the smallest flicker of faith.

We don't reject our past; we use the past as the foundation for the next step. This is also a key to understanding the nature of spiritual growth. Every time we think we "have it," we realize the "it" we have is another plateau on which to stand to see a new horizon, and move on to the next higher level of spirituality. We never sit on that plateau, thinking we have arrived at our destination. We have no final destination regarding our spiritual development, as our goal is not complying with a known and finite set of rules and regulations. Our goal is Christlikeness, and we never can say we're there.

### **Three areas of growth**

We grow spiritually in three ways:

First, and most basic, of course, is in our knowledge of scripture. Being the reflection of the Divine mind that it is, scripture never fails to offer more of its treasures to the diligent seeker. Read any portion for the hundredth time and still new lessons emerge.

Applying God's word to our lives is the second way we grow. Any Christadelphian child knows dozens of memory verses. Yet how old must we get until we really appreciate and act upon "*the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord*"? Ask a fifty-year-old and an eighty-year-old who have known this teaching from their youth if it still has the same impact as it did decades ago. Hundreds of other passages and teachings are the same. The more experience we have with life, the more meaning and fuller application we can realize.

The third area of spiritual growth sets us apart from the legalist model more than anything else in the whole area of learning. This third area covers what we call "*expanding horizons*," or the paradox of learning. As we plan to discuss in a future article, the New Covenant contains many inherent paradoxes. The nature of the New Covenant requires paradox, and the paradox appropriate to this article concerns the principal of knowledge and learning.

The nature of man constitutes one of the principle teachings of scripture. We learn from the Bible that we are, as one brother elegantly stated, "*a sackful of sin*." We learn of our faults, our limitations, our frailty, our utter dependence on the Almighty. We could cite again the last few chapters of Job, in which the Almighty "*reminds*" Job of these truths. So we learn that we really don't amount to much, by nature. We learn that we really don't know much. The more we learn about human nature, the more we learn how limited it is. Thus, the paradox: the more we learn, the more we don't know. At least if we study aright and use our Bible knowledge for its intended purpose, we grow in the realization of our ignorance.

Under the legal framework, the more one knew, the more one knew. In the realm of the spirit, the more one knows, the more one becomes aware of how much one doesn't know. This is the expanding horizon mentioned above. When we learn spiritual truth, we learn the relationship between man and God. We learn how much we don't know. We develop humility and meekness as side-effects. The young, inexperienced brother who has done a little studying believes he knows all about Romans. The old, wise brother, with decades of reading and study, knows how much he doesn't know about Romans. If a human could fully appreciate and understand the word of God, would scripture truly reflect the mind of an omniscient Deity?

Spiritual growth means we do learn more and more. But this learning should teach us more and more that we are indeed less and less. Each time we climb higher we realize a bigger and broader picture of God, Jesus, man, and the kingdom. Our absolute knowledge grows, but our relative knowledge shrinks. We thus diminish self and magnify the Creator and His son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Contrast with rules**

As we said at the beginning of this article, the Old Covenant had no contrast of spiritual growth. The Old Covenant system, the principle of law, couldn't contain a concept of expanding horizons. It had absolutes: a set of rules to follow. One didn't grow into new sets of rules. They had one set, one standard, one expectation. You met it or you didn't. Because only behaviors count in rule-based theology, spiritual growth, which affected values, character, and identity, had no relevance.

### **Practical applications**

If we all grow, it is a given that we're all at different places along the way. We all have the same goal, but we're all at different places in our journey to that goal. No one achieves the goal. It's impossible for humans to achieve perfection. Some of us will get further than others, but no one "*wins*" the race. Jesus said, in one of the many teachings on spiritual growth, that some would produce thirty-fold, some sixty-fold, some a hundred-fold (Mk. 4:20). God accepts all these. He excludes only those who don't grow at all.

So we accept our variations. We never alter our one standard, but we do understand that everyone is at a different level and moving at a different rate. That leads us to the realm of patience, longsuffering, tolerance, and forbearance.

### **Against such there is no law**

Bible teaching on spiritual growth uses the natural world as its basis. Going back as far as the creation, we can see the elements of a pattern. On the third day (Gen. 1:9-12), dry land appears out of water. The dry land bears plant life. The plants sustain their life, bearing fruit containing the seeds for the next generation. The spiritual parallel: when we emerge from water (at baptism), we begin the process of bearing spiritual fruit. "*First the blade, and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear*" (Hymn 323). The fruit of our faith, like its natural counterpart, sustains itself. The more faith we have, the more we can grow. No seed, no fruit. No fruit, no seed.

Scripture often uses the natural world to illustrate spiritual growth. The first psalm speaks of those who love God's word as being like a tree planted by a river that flourishes and "*bears fruit in its season.*" Psalm 92:12-14 describes a similar picture, likening the righteous to palm trees which bear in their old age. Isaiah 5:1-7 (the basis of the parable of the vineyard) likens the righteous to those who bear good grapes, but unfortunately the vineyard (sinful Israel) only yielded bad grapes. Many of Jesus' parables involved pictures of plants growing and bearing fruit -- or not. All these figures of speech involve something living, thriving, growing, and, ultimately, bearing fruit. Without fruit, a plant cannot survive. It must reproduce itself. Jesus cursed the

fig tree because it only looked alive, but bore no fruit. Bearing fruit is the ultimate goal of natural and spiritual growth.

Fortunately, we have no need to guess the identity of spiritual fruit. Paul lists the nine aspects of the singular fruit in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. In a letter filled with his most direct appeals about the vanity of following laws, Paul gives this wonderful example of spiritual growth. If we don't develop this fruit from our Bible study and walk in the Truth, we have contravened God's intent for His word.

Paul concludes the list of characteristics of spiritual fruit with the phrase, "*against such there is no law.*" We could hardly ask for a more cogent teaching concerning spiritual growth and legalism. No law, says Paul, can substitute for the development of spiritual fruit. No law can condemn a person who bears spiritual fruit. No system of law can have spiritual fruit as its outcome. The phrase might mean any or all these, but whatever exactly Paul meant, we do know that he placed spiritual growth outside the realm of law. Spirit can produce spiritual fruit, but law can't. Law can't give life, it can't build character, it can't contain the ever-increasing perspective one needs for continual growth. Only spirit-mindedness can do this. Love, faith, an awareness of our utter dependence on God the Creator, an appreciation of our debt to the Lord Jesus Christ, and the ever-increasing awareness of our own humanity -- these are the bases of spiritual growth. None of them can develop through legal and ritual observance.

The topic of spiritual growth can take us to many places and lines of thought. If we put it all in perspective of something that exists entirely on a higher level than the principle of rules, we will have a framework to gain the benefits of our study in this area. To grow, we must inhabit (theologically) a system that allows for growth. The system of grace and faith, the New Covenant of our Lord Jesus Christ, provides the framework we need. We have the seed. We need to cultivate the soil.

Lord, help us grow and bear fruit forever in your Kingdom.

# 17

## Lessons from Hebrews

If we asked the question, "*Which New Testament book has the most detailed comparison of the law to the work of Christ?*" most people would respond, "*Hebrews.*" The operative idea in Hebrews, however, is actually "*contrast,*" not "*comparison.*" When we compare, we look for similarities between two objects or ideas.

When we contrast, we look for differences. A biblical example of comparison would be "*as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up*" (John 3:14). Here, Jesus makes the comparison between his atoning sacrifice and the incident of the bronze serpent recorded in Numbers. We can draw out lessons by looking at the similarities, and seeing the typical meaning of the first event.

### Revelation through Christ's life

Hebrews does have more detail about the law than any other epistle, and that detail is set alongside the work of Christ. The writer, though, intends to show the differences, not commonalities, between the law and Christ. He emphasizes *contrast*, not *comparison*. The reason for this contrast? To show that the atoning work of Christ addressed the key issue, sinful human nature, whereas the rituals of the law had no efficacy to ameliorate either the nature or consequences of sin.

Hebrews repeatedly uses a word that shows the superiority of Christ over Moses. Translated variously as "*more,*" "*better,*" etc., the writer some dozen or so times claims that Christ's work did what the law couldn't. He makes detailed contrasts between the old covenant of works and rituals, and the new covenant of grace and faith. Then, in a section recorded in chapter ten, he quotes from Psalm 40 and establishes the vital factor by which the New Covenant of our Lord Jesus became eternally installed.

Let's start where Hebrews starts -- with the first contrast, the one that comes in the prologue of the letter. This contrast highlights the difference between God's communication "*of old*" through the prophets, and the current manifestation of the Son. The difference? "*He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature*" (Heb. 1:3). "*For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily*" (Col. 2:9 RSV). "*The word became flesh and dwelt among us*" (John 1:14 RSV). God's revelation of Himself through His son surpassed any spoken or written revelation of the past.

He gave law, He gave prophecies, He gave psalms through David and wisdom through Solomon. However, no prophet's life itself fully represented God. *"If you have seen me, you have seen the father,"* said Jesus. It was his life, not just his words, that distinguished Jesus' ministry. *The medium of the message of the New Covenant was a life of perfect faith.* This contrasted with a spoken or written message. This was the dispensation of life, not of laws. Life came not from following a written code, but from emulating the life of God's son. The covenant of death had a basis of laws carved in stone (II Cor. 3:6-7); the covenant of life had its basis in a human life. Later in the letter, the writer will tell us the key factor which distinguished the magnificence of this life.

### **Something better**

Now let's take a brief look at a series of contrasts, all in passages that use the word *"better."* What does Hebrews tell us is *"better"* about the New Covenant?

- a more excellent name (than the angels) 1:4.
- better things that belong to salvation 6:9.
- Melchizedek better than Levitical priesthood 7:5-10.
- a better hope 7:19.
- a better covenant 7:22.
- a more excellent ministry, a better covenant established on better promises 8:6.
- better sacrifices 9:23.
- a better possession 10:34.
- (the faithful of old) desired a better country 11:16.
- a better resurrection 11:35.
- something better for us (the Kingdom) 11:40.

(Note: *"more excellent"* (1:4 and 8:6) represents one Greek word, the remainder of the references another Greek word.)

The cumulative force of this listing impresses on us the writer's perspective. Not so much does he use details of the law to draw lessons about the ministry of Jesus; rather, he contrasts the failings and weaknesses of the law with the perfection of God's work in Christ.

Take, for example, the issue of the priesthood (7:11-28). The priests of the former priesthood, the Levitical, had a limitation. They died now and then, in contrast to the eternal priesthood of the immortal Jesus (vs. 23-24). Implied in this contrast is his sinlessness, a point expanded on in (7:27).

The writer's point in mentioning the Levitical priesthood is not to show the similarity with Jesus, but the contrast. To our minds, unfamiliar with actually living under the old covenant, they might look the same. To one born and raised under the old

covenant system, the contrasts would be dynamic. *"On the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God"* (7:18,19, RSV). This is clearly the language of contrast, spoken by one who had experienced both systems.

**Metaphors of body and mind**

Moving on to chapter nine, we have an explicit contrast which hones in on a key difference between ritualistic adherence and the righteousness that comes by faith. In the first ten verses, we read a brief description of the arrangements of the sanctuary and the priest’s activities, particularly on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. After several verses of recording the facts, the writer adds the commentary, *"by this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer tent is still standing, which is symbolic for the present age."* Something was still wrong with the system. The commentary continues, *"According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, but deal only with food and drink and various ablutions, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation."* The various rituals of the law dealt only with the body; they had no efficacy on the conscience of the worshipper. That is, one could go through the motions of ritual without any inner perception, without any symbolic learning, without any vicarious awareness, without any devotion or reverence or faith. As we have said in many ways in previous articles, no activity in the realm of behavior necessarily affects one’s mind. Nor does any activity or ritual or behavior have any necessary correlation with one’s piety.

**Christ’s superior sacrifice**

Now comes Christ into the true holy of holies. Not a physical entrance, but a spiritual one. Not a tent made by the craftsmanship of Israel’s finest artisans, but that realm which represented the presence of his Father. He took not animal sacrificial blood, but his own. Here we read the completion of the analogy (9:13). We can set out the key points thus:

blood of bulls and goats	his own blood
purification of the flesh, regulations for the body	purify your conscience

Ritual applied only to the realm of ritual, that is, ceremonial cleanliness. It had no effect in the realm of conscience.

So what made the blood of Christ a *"better sacrifice"* (v.23)? We could answer, *"Because Jesus did no sin,"* but neither did bulls and goats. Not in the sense that they had no blemish, but in the moral sense -- they had no sin. *"Ah,"* you say, *"they had no sin because they were amoral -- outside the realm of morality."* That’s right. They could not do sin, nor could they do right. They were just animals. That is the issue -- not that they were sinless, but that they couldn’t do right. They had no free will to exercise. As much as they might represent certain aspects of human nature in their brute instincts and desires, no animal could willingly offer itself as a sacrifice. No animal could represent faith. No animal could serve as a model of obedience for

humans to emulate. No animal could deal with all the aspects of human nature gone wrong.

Thus the superiority of Christ's sacrifice depended on his identification with human nature, and the efficacy of his sacrifice for us depends on our identification with him.

## **I have come to do thy will**

When we get to Hebrews 10, we have one more iteration of the failure of ritual to deal with the conscience. Yes, it is repetitious, a divine repetition to make us fully aware of an immensely important theological principle: *ritual (behavior) cannot perfect conscience (thinking)*. The two operate at different levels. Finally comes the blunt declaration: it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin. Fifteen hundred years of Mosaic observance, and sin still ruled (through the law) over all Israel!

Now comes the quotation from Psalm 40 which demonstrates exactly the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice, and what his blood truly represented. The quotation itself starts with one of the many Old Testament declarations of the law's futility, "*sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired...in burnt offerings and sin offerings you take no pleasure.*" In what would God take pleasure? "*Lo, I have come to do thy will.*" This point gets repeated for emphasis, adding that God abolished the covenant of ritual in order to establish the second covenant established upon "*I have come to do thy will.*"

Do thy will. That's what gave superiority to Christ's covenant. It represented the subjugation of human will to the purpose of the Lord God. No animal sacrifice could ever do that. Can you imagine a bull willingly offering itself upon the altar? The thought is absurd. The priests dragged the ignorant beast out of the herd, slit its throat, drained its blood, and burned it. The bull had no say in the matter at all. It was only an "*innocent bystander,*" brainlessly chewing its cud, not having any clue as to its imminent demise or purpose. It was just a stupid brute going to slaughter, and it had no fraction of an idea that it was involved in something important. A bull at the slaughterhouse, destined for hamburger, would have the same spiritual insight -- none.

Only a human could sacrifice his own will. Only a human could deal with the real problem -- human nature. Only a human could make a lifelong commitment to subjugate will, and then willingly offer oneself, and know exactly what he was doing. Only a perfect human's willing offering of self could address all the issues of human nature, namely:

1. He dealt with the reality of human nature in his own person.
2. He dealt with the principle of sin, nailing it representationally to the cross.
3. He gave us the example to follow so we can experience, although imperfectly, subjugating our own will.
4. He gave us a basis of faith so that by grace we can experience immortality, and thus the physical destruction of our own human nature.
5. By his own resurrection, he now has the immortal power to cleanse the earth of all human nature.

Thus, the willing subjugation of free will by the Lord Jesus sufficed to ameliorate every aspect of the calamity of the misuse of human free will. In himself, in us, in the world -- symbolically, representatively, physically. Jesus conquered will, something no animal could do. Animals could not deal with will. Thus, they could only serve as instruments of legal purification.

### **The willing slave**

One more point. The quotation of Psalm 40 in Hebrews 10:5 comes from the Septuagint translation which reads, "*a body thou hast prepared for me.*" However, this same line in the Hebrew text of Psalm 40:6 reads, "*thou hast given me an open ear,*" or "*ears thou hast dug for me*" (RSV mg.). This perhaps alludes to the practice of a slave willingly volunteering his lifelong fealty to his master when he could have otherwise been set free (Ex. 21:1-6). The master would take the slave to the door, put his ear up against the flat of the jamb, and bore a hole in it with an awl -- "*and he shall serve him for life.*"

This provision of the law comes immediately after the giving of the ten commandments (Ex. 20). Psalm 40's next phrase reads "*I delight to do thy will, O my God, thy law is within my heart.*" What a beautiful contrast, prefiguring Paul's same analysis in II Corinthians, where he contrasted the law of the dispensation of death, written on tablets of stone, with the spirit of Christ, written on our hearts (II Cor. 3:2-6).

The Hebrews quote ends with Psa. 40:7, but as is often the case, the mind of the reader goes on. Any diligent Jew of Paul's day would know what came after, "*I have come to do thy will.*" The next line reads, "*I delight to do thy will, O my God, thy law is within my heart*" (Psa.40:8). Here we have, stated clearly as can be, in the Old Testament, the principle of Christ's superiority over the law, and the basis of every "*better*" of the book of Hebrews: the subjugation of human will. Jesus loved his father so much that it became his delight to do his father's will, even though that will meant his death on the cross.

A person can offer no greater sacrifice than to lay his will at the foot of God's throne. This is not a ritual -- it is the daily harnessing of our internal rebellion and fleshly desires and lusts. It is the deference of self to God. This is not a mere Lenten ritual of self-denial behavior; this is the real thing. This is the operation of the spirit on the highest level of our inner being -- our will. This quotation from Psalm 40 so aptly states what made Messiah's work better than the blood of bulls and goats. Finally a sacrifice was offered that operated in the realm of conscience, values and identity. One's will is one's being, and Christ said, "*Not my being, but your glory, your purpose, your mind be manifested.*"

Brothers and sisters, this is a power to emulate. Christ identified with human nature so that the era of grace could replace the era of law. If we identify with the sacrifice of Christ at its fullest level -- the level of will -- we can assure that his death will not have been in vain. We have entered into the blood of the eternal covenant, the blood that represents sacrificed will, the blood that deals with conscience, the blood that represents the eternal covenant and the resurrection to eternal life. If we reduce his death to a mere ritual of Sunday observance, we have trodden the blood of the Son of God underfoot, as any other sacrificial animal.

# 18

## Clean and Unclean

We can't find a better contrast between legalism and faith than the concept of "*clean*" and "*unclean*." Unclean had clear delineation under the law, which forbade certain foods, animals, objects and activities. When a gray area God had left did appear, the Pharisees quickly slapped on the high contrast filters to get things back to black and white.

### Clarifying the ambiguous

The Pharisees took two kinds of precautions to prevent contact with an unclean object, or to prevent doing anything that might render them unclean.

First, they had to carefully scrutinize and categorize every physical object and every nuance of the circumstances of their use. Some things were always unclean, such as pigs, so they posed no problem. But a cow could be clean or unclean, depending on how it was slaughtered and butchered. Here, one really had to know the rules to make sure one ate only clean (kosher) meat.

Second (in addition to knowing the sometimes infinitesimal distinctions between the clean and the unclean) the fastidious Jew also employed avoidance behaviors (e.g., Luke 10:31,32). As we learned in some of the earlier installments of the series, this could mean going as far as having two separate, fully-equipped kitchens to make sure that a vessel which once contained a milk product would never be used at a meal where meat was served. One had to know the rules and one had to carefully follow a vigilant regimen of avoidance behavior to stay pure from defilement.

If the Lord God ordained such distinctions (e.g., Lev. 13-15), how could anyone ever disregard them or relegate them to desuetude? How could anyone, especially a Jew, come along and say, "*all foods are clean*"? Little wonder the Pharisees took such violent exception to the teaching of Jesus and the early church. The change of covenants signified a major change of perspective on the matter of clean and unclean. As we say today, the early believers had a "*paradigm shift*."

Such was necessary, because a system of Jewish national laws which specified external uncleanness could not co-exist with a system based on the individual faith of any Jew or Gentile in the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus.

Here's why: If one avoided the unclean, then one had, de facto, ritual cleanliness. In other words, the most obvious failing of the legal system of clean and unclean was

that it implicitly categorized a person as "*clean*" until defiled. You could only become defiled if you were previously clean. Under a system of law, human beings were innocent and clean by nature, and only unclean or defiled by circumstances of life. Defilement occurred from the outside; therefore, the person had to be inherently "*clean*."

However, God has consigned all to disobedience that He may have mercy on all (Rom. 11:32). Human nature isn't clean. We don't start out clean and try to avoid anything out there that makes us unclean. We start out condemned to uncleanness by our mortal nature and the inevitable sins that come from our proneness to sin. So the first lesson we learn about clean and unclean is this: any system of designated clean and unclean objects or activities precludes the operation of grace, and vice versa.

They can't co-exist, because they clash at the nexus of human nature. The one system depends on our inherent uncleanness; the other implies we are inherently clean.

In the first century, those who first incurred the shift of focus didn't easily accept this lesson. Not only did they have to get used to eating swine and other previously verboten animals, but the entire basis of clean and unclean was abolished. Little wonder then that the New Testament has several references to this issue. Consider the following list:

*"There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him, but the things which come out of a man are what defile him...whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters, not his heart, but his stomach, and so passes on. Thus he declared all foods clean. What comes out of a man defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these things come from within, and they defile a man"* (Mark 7:14-23, see also Mt. 15:1-11 RSV as all verses).

*"The Pharisees were astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. And the Lord said to him, 'Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of extortion and wickedness...Give for alms those things which are within, and behold, everything is clean for you'"* (Luke 11: 37-44).

*"And there came a voice to him, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'No Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.' And the voice came to him again a second time, 'What God has cleansed, you must not call common'"* (Acts 10:13-15, see also Acts 11:8-9).

*"I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean." "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for any one to make others fall by what he eats"* (Rom. 14:14, 20).

*"All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up"* (I Cor. 10:23).

*"For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving"* (I Tim 4:4).

*"To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted" (Titus 1:15).*

The inspired testimonies of Jesus, Peter, and Paul all agree: the matter of external or ritual uncleanness is extinct. Nothing outside a person can carry the label "*unclean*." No food, no object, no place, no thing of any kind. On the one hand, this simplified life; no longer did a person need to keep meticulous track of eating, utensils, food sources, and so on. Further, with the need for ritual cleanness gone, so also went the various ablutions and atonements connected with acts of defilement.

Did this really make life simpler? Or did it allow license for all kinds of questionable activities? Would this lead people in wrong directions? What would people use as a metaphorical basis of right and wrong? How would we learn to distinguish right and wrong if everything was clean? Clearly, the abolition of the law freed people from the issue of slavery to a dead system, but it did not free them from the struggles of spirituality. Rather, the covenant of grace led people to a higher level of thinking. Instead of a Pharisaical regimen of casuistry and irrelevant polemics, people would now dwell upon the virtues of love, self-discipline, faith, and forbearance. New Testament teaching could develop a level of morality unavailable to keepers of the law.

## **Looking inside**

Starting with the declarations of Jesus recorded in Mark's gospel, we see that much more was at stake than declaring swine's flesh ceremonially clean. "*Thus he declared all foods clean,*" Mark's parenthetical comment, takes us beyond the issue of food, as Jesus' discourse covers much greater issues than eating.

At issue is the principle of the origin of sin.

If something, *anything*, external is inherently unclean, then people could become unclean through association with that object. But if nothing is inherently unclean, then uncleanness has a different basis.

Jesus stated that basis: the human heart, clearly here referring to the brain, or thinking. Jesus said, "*Out of the heart come evil thoughts.*" Physiologically, blood comes out of the heart and thoughts come out of the brain. This figurative use of "*heart*" demonstrates the intrinsic dearness with which we hold our lusts. A list of twelve evil activities follows: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. These words connote behaviors, not thoughts. Out of the heart (brain) come evil thoughts, and the thoughts in turn beget the behaviors of sin (cp. Micah 2:1,2). These sins represent a far more reprehensible lifestyle than eating swine's flesh. Could eating any food inculcate such atrocious behavior? Food has no effect on morality. Eating the right stuff won't make you good; eating the wrong stuff won't make you bad.

We must look truly inside of ourselves for the answer to the problem of immorality. All foods are clean and available for our use, and we should receive them with thanks. Not all foods have equal dietary merit, but that's not the issue at hand. Defilement comes from evil thoughts which lead to evil actions. That's the issue. A quick analysis of the list reveals a focus on self-centered and sensuous behaviors. It pictures human

nature at its worst. Regrettably, the list describes the completeness of David's evil in the affair with Bathsheba, yet he found forgiveness because he repented.

### **Repentance also internal**

We look inside because that's where the problem is, and that's also where the remedy lies. That same evil heart -- by God's grace -- can also recognize its own evil, and repent. That same evil heart can also harbor love and faith, and generate the ensuing good works. Just as we can think evil and then do it, we can also develop faith and then do the works of faith.

That same evil heart can receive grace and God's love, the things that go into a man and stay there; they don't just pass through like food does. The heart, which Jesus called "*within*" and Paul called the "*inmost self*" (Rom. 7: 22), is bent, by nature, to evil, but it can, with spiritual intake, contain love and joy and peace. Spiritual intake affects the true heart, that is the thinking, but the intake of things physical has no effect on morality or thinking. Therefore the issue of foods becomes moot.

### **Beyond food**

Before we go on to some other considerations, we want to expand on the food issue. Most of the scriptural examples in our list refer to foods, but what about other things? What about clothes? What about books, movies, TV, music, and so on? What about activities, hobbies, sports, etc? What about jobs, homes, and everything else in our world? Can we still label any of these clean and unclean?

In one respect, these are all "*externals*" also; that is, they form the world we live in, but they aren't "*us*." They're still outside of us. Being outside, and not human hearts themselves, they cannot be either "*good*" or "*bad*." In and of themselves, they have no morality.

If everything then is clean, does that mean we can do whatever we desire? Is there no need for any discretion or restraint? Are we entirely free? "*No, we're not,*" is the right answer, but the "*no*" must be for the right reason. Unlike totally neutral substances such as food, *items such as books and movies are the product of human hearts, and thus impact our brains while food does not.* One cannot responsibly hide behind the rubric "*all things are clean*" and so open one's self to all manner of influence to evil. It may not be a sin *per se*, as far as a legal accounting goes, but the question we must ask is not, "*What's wrong with it?*" but, "*How is this helpful?*"

Let's go back to Paul's guidance in Corinthians, where he states that all things are lawful, but not all are helpful or edifying. The issue is not, "*It's O.K. because nothing out there can defile me,*" but rather, "*Will this help me grow in Christ?*" We plan to cover this in more detail in the next article. The application now focuses on the realization that all things are clean, but not all things are helpful. Not only do humans sin, but human hearts can produce works that influence others to sin. Paul wrote to Timothy, "*Everything created by God is good.*" Not so for that which comes from human enterprise.

## Creating uncleanness

Paul asserts in the Romans and Titus quotations that although everything is clean, anything can also be unclean to him who thinks it is unclean. This can apply in two ways. There's also one thing it can't mean, and we need to look at that first.

What Paul couldn't mean was that our own value system could actually make something "*unclean*," as if each person was a law-making body for himself. If I esteem something unclean, does it *actually* become unclean? If it does, it would amount to a reversal of God's plan of grace. All things are clean, and we cannot make them unclean no matter what we think of them. It would also mean that if I avoided the object that I had personally labeled unclean, then I would have title to some kind of legal righteousness. Clearly, this meaning cannot apply.

For example, one can never make eating ham a sin. People can feel bad and ashamed about eating something they regard as unclean, but they can't actually defile themselves, because nothing outside a man can defile him. The bad feeling we get is an ill conscience -- as if we had actually transgressed -- and that's why Paul says "*Don't eat it if it bothers you.*" But in fact we haven't transgressed, because the "*law*" we internally established had no basis for existence -- it was just a personal scruple.

To find out what Paul did mean, let's consider the historical and social context of Paul's teaching. Under the recently departed law, certain foods were unclean. Now they're fine. Even food offered to idols was acceptable, because the idols had no real existence (I Cor. 8:4). But some might still have reservations about eating such food. Their conscience might bother them about the fact that they ate meat which had been dedicated to an idol of a Greek God. Certainly, eating something that one had always associated with sin and pagan behavior would be a spiritual stretch. Thus, Paul wrote: if it bothers you, don't eat it. For you, it's off limits, and that's okay. Maybe someday you'll accept that it's all right, but if you would feel ashamed, then by all means don't eat. So for you, that food is still off limits, but only because your faith is still growing in that area. In an accession to human perception and individual conscience, Paul did not command eating all foods.

A second meaning alludes to the recrudescence of legalism that such an attitude might reflect. Let's say you grew up Jewish, and you're hamophobic. Scripture says ham is clean, but you're not so sure. You still have some doubts about certain things. You need a vision from heaven to convince you otherwise. If you harbor in your heart some vestigial legalist labels for your scruples, then you have made them unclean, not because they are unclean, but because you've delved back into legalism. To the pure all things are pure, because they will see them in that light. But to one who still believes that "*some things out there can defile me*," nothing is pure, because that person has fallen away from grace and back into the law. We have judged ourselves by our own legal system. We avoided one thing, but we've fallen back into the law, wherein we cannot survive (Gal. 2:18). All things are clean, not all are helpful, not all are good for everyone, but *defilement comes only from the sensuous, self-centered thinking of our human nature*. That's the true uncleanness of the world, the uncleanness that we can wash away in the blood of Christ, and not by any ceremonial work of the law. Several other issues stem from the consideration of clean and unclean; these, God willing, we will continue in our next article, *Freedom in Christ*.

# 19

## Freedom in Christ

Victor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist, was one of the millions of Jews brutally confined in concentration camps during the Holocaust of World War II. Unlike many who perished, including all of his family, Frankl maintained his life and sanity in the most dreadful conditions, as he could see beyond the horror of daily life. He had a purpose and meaning of life. After the war he became a well-known writer, lecturer, professor, and clinician. He had many academic appointments in this country, and wrote until the end of his long life just three years ago. A poll conducted by the Library of Congress rated his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (a personal psychological account of life in the concentration camps) as one of the most influential books in the U.S. [1]

### Responsible freedom

Having survived three years in imprisonment, oppression, utter deprivation, and dehumanization, we would expect that he would have more than a few thoughts on the subject of freedom. He might have championed totally free and unrestricted human destiny, but not so. Rather, Frankl mused that "*the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast should be balanced by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast*" [2]. Entirely unrestricted freedom does not lead one to any higher purpose in life, nor does it give any meaning or usefulness. Responsible freedom gives our lives value and meaning.

When we become free in Christ, we become slaves to personal responsibility. We do not shed our bondage, rather, we exchange it for a new kind. But the new bondage is self-imposed. It doesn't have rules set by a master who owns our lives against our will. It has the rule of personal responsibility given by a master who loves us, and to whom we have voluntarily pledged our will.

More than any other definition, *freedom in Christ means the voluntary subjugation of free choice for the sake of our brothers and sisters*. Only when we come to know this dynamic can we truly say we are "*free at last*."

As long as we struggle with our flesh, we live in bondage to our flesh. As long as we erect laws and rules, we live in bondage to those rules. When we seek the fullness of the sacrifice of Christ, we find the freedom that allows us to sacrifice our own wills back to the Father, and to all of His children. Only free-will sacrifice avails any benefit; hence, freedom is the basis of a meaningful discipleship in the Lord Jesus.

The exact wording "*freedom in Christ*," a common enough phrase, doesn't occur in scripture. However, Galatians 5:1 provides its source: "*For freedom (liberty, AV) Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*"(RSV). The Greek word translated "*liberty*" in the AV is the word for "*free*," shows up twice in v. 13 and several times in the analogy of Sarah and Hagar (4:21-31). Jesus declared directly: "*The truth shall make you free*" (John 8:32). The truth of grace in Jesus gave freedom to those who lived in bondage to law and sin (John 1:17). Our study this month will explore the facets of this freedom.

## **No works? No controls?**

We will soon see that freedom from law means liberty in service, so we will start by addressing the issue of works under the covenant of grace. How can we say we are free if we still have an appointed service to perform? The issue at hand is not one of works versus faith. It is, rather, an issue of attitude. A slave to the law has a belief system which says, "*I must follow certain rules and rituals to please God and earn salvation. If I do the right things, God owes me eternal life.*" This, as we noted in earlier articles, is self-centered, and relegates God to a secondary role in the process of salvation. Conversely, a servant of Christ has the belief system which says, "*Christ has freed me from law, sin, and death. Therefore, I acknowledge this great gift by voluntarily enslaving myself to his work.*"

Thus, the works of freedom come from an entirely different perspective. But never think that freedom in Christ somehow means freedom from any restraint or works. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "*For by grace you have been saved...not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works*" (Eph. 2:8-10). Immediately after writing that we are not saved by works, Paul stated we are created in Christ for good works. Titus 2:11-14 has the same remarkable message, placing good works immediately in the context of being saved by grace. Thus, freedom in Christ plainly does not preclude freedom from works -- the change we make is the attitudinal basis of the works.

Nor does freedom imply freedom from law. We have a law of the highest order. "For the love of Christ controls us" (II Cor. 5:14). "*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*" We do have controls and commands, but they come from the love of Christ.

Again we make the point: freedom does not mean license, nor freedom from restraint or morality or law. It is the voluntary transference of our affections to the principles of God that free us from slavery to ritual and self that we might be free to be useful to God.

## **Freedom from, or freedom to?**

Recently, a brother wrote to me posing the question, Does freedom in Christ mean "*freedom from*," or "*freedom to*?" I replied, "*Ultimately it must mean both, as we are both freed from the law and freed to use whatever resources we can, as long as we do it with the aim of building up the body of Christ. Gal. 5:13 really answers the question. Paul exhorts us to use our freedom in service, not in self-indulgence.*"

Christ freed us from the law (Rom. 8:2,3) so that we could be free to serve others without a yoke or burden of legalistic restrictions. Christ also freed us from the sin which the law magnified. Paul taught that one purpose of the law was the manifestation of sin (Rom. 3:20, 5:20, 7:7-11, Gal. 3:19); therefore freedom from the law also expresses freedom from sin. However, hardly any believer of today has had the experience of living under the law and its Pharisaic complications. But many of us have experienced liberation from some sort of religious legalism, and this liberation reflects the same principle. Freedom from any system of law represents freedom from sin, because we now have grace. Rules magnify sin, but grace annuls sin.

Freedom from sin is always an issue for anyone, at any time. The Pharisees, who had more laws than anyone, therefore also had the greatest reminders of their sin. They tried in vain to achieve righteousness -- with yet more laws! Like trying to slay the Hydra, the more they made laws which they thought would protect them, the more they became enslaved to sin without remedy. Jesus told the Pharisees that every one who commits sin is a slave to sin, but the Son makes us free (John 8:34-36). They had no "*freedom from.*" We live without the constant vigilance that the law-impounded individual has. Jesus lifted the burden of the law (Mt.11:28-30), but yoked us to his way of life.

### **Now slaves to love**

We must also consider "*freedom to,*" as the two ideas -- "*freedom from*" and "*freedom to*" -- inevitably interpenetrate each other. Paul wrote, "*You have been called to freedom, brethren, only do not use your freedom as an indulgence of the flesh, but through love be servants one of another*" (Gal. 5:13). We do not have to limit ourselves to living under any set of conditions that would hinder our utility to God. Unlike the priest and Levite who had to bypass the fallen traveler on the Jericho road (Lk. 10:31, 32), we have no restrictions on whom we can serve, and when and how we can order our lives of service and good works. Yes, Jesus freed us from the law and any ritualized worship or morality. But this does not make us free from the eternal principles of God. We have traded slavery to law for slavery to love. The key word "*love*" replaces the restrictions of the law. We are freed "*from*" so we can be free "*to.*"

Those impounded by a system of law have their primary service in fulfilling the law. Those whose only law is love have their primary service as fulfilling the precepts of love. Love requires interpersonal awareness; one must think outside of self. Love of God requires we think of God. Life under the law requires that we think only of the law and of self, in our fulfillment.

### **Freedom to serve, not anarchy**

It is an entirely different framework of service and morality. Being freed from law is not just freedom from the behavioral burdens of ritual and avoidance; it is freedom of mind so that we can develop ourselves in love. Freedom "*from,*" only, leaves us in theological and moral anarchy. Freedom "*from,*" without freedom "*to,*" results in license, not freedom at all. Hence, we have these two ideas immediately adjoined in some of the principal passages concerning freedom in Christ (e.g., Mt. 11:28-30, Gal. 5:13, I Pet. 2:16).

We have noted we have no external laws of limitations. We have the internal law of love, which comes from the heart. The law of love says, *"I will only use my freedom insofar as it helps others."* True freedom does not authorize licentiousness; it offers widened opportunity. It gives permission to remove restrictions in service.

We do not find people who correctly apprehend freedom in Christ using this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. We do find those immature in Christ often justifying their actions by this dictum. One might choose, for instance, questionable entertainment or employment venues, and justify such as part of their freedom. After all, no one has a law against such. But we have a more powerful law than that which externally decides our morality. It is the law of love.

### **Freedom of service**

Under the Pharisees version of the law, holiness came from doing less and less. The more one avoided, the more holiness one had. Even good works had limitations: not on the Sabbath, not to lepers, not to Samaritans, not with sinners, not if it meant eating with Gentiles. The freedom we have is the liberation from those social restrictions which limit our usefulness to others. This therefore allows us to work on the Sabbath, eat with Gentiles, preach to Samaritans, offer balm to lepers and sinners. This is freedom, the only freedom enjoined under the New Covenant.

*It is a novice mistake to take any course of life and declare this as part of one's "freedom in Christ."* The freedom of which Christ spoke was a "yoke." Take my yoke upon you, he asks of us. I touched lepers, talked with Samaritans, ate with sinners, let a prostitute anoint me, and fed the Gentiles. That's freedom -- freedom of service, not freedom of self-indulgence. This freedom means that in Christ, as long as we orient our lives to good works, preaching, serving, and holiness, we can do so in any fashion, without fear of *"the unclean."*

### **The conclusion in Galatians**

Continuing on from Paul's declaration of freedom in Galatians 5:1, Paul has a parenthetical section in verses 2-12 where he again warns the Galatians of falling back into the law. If you establish one law, says Paul using the example of receiving circumcision, you have bound yourself to keeping the whole law, because you have exchanged the principle of grace for law.

Then, in verse 13, Paul returns to the subject of freedom. Here he exhorts us *"through love be servants of one another."* The word for servants means *"slaves;"* Peter used the same word when he wrote, *"live as free men...but live as servants to God"* (1 Pet. 2:16). The *Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* [3] renders both instances as *"slaves;"* it is the word *doulos* normally used to describe slaves or bondservants, not serving brothers (*diakonos*). New Testament usage often has the connotation of willing bondsman, (e.g., Romans 1:1) [4]. That should put an end to anyone going out of bounds with their freedom issues, at least if they listen to God on the matter.

*Freedom in Christ means slavery to service.*

Finally, we come to the works of the flesh and fruit of the spirit (5:19-23). These two lists show the outcome of living under law vs. living under grace. Law begets no faith, and therefore no basis of morality. The fruit of the spirit, however, teaches the development of morality and character in the absence of law. Freedom from law allows faith, and faith grows morality. Hence, those who are truly free in Christ achieve the highest levels of spirituality and service. Freedom in Christ means personal responsibility, free-will slavery to righteousness, and the highest development of morality. Any other definition of freedom only retains servitude to the indulgences of the flesh.

### Freedom and legalism

So how does this contrast to the covenant of works and laws? Slavery to law means directing the mind to things, self, and rewards. We can misuse freedom and miss all of the benefits of spiritual growth that it offers, but life under law gives us no chance at all to develop spirituality. Slavery to freedom means directing the mind to God's principles, service, others, and selflessness. One is the way of death, the other is the way of life.

#### Footnotes:

1. Viktor-Frankl-Institut, 2000. <http://logotherapy.univie.at/indexE.html>
2. Yalom, Irwin D., 1985. Page 245, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, New York: Basic Books.
3. Marshall, Alfred, 1958. *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
4. Vine, W.E. 1966. Page 139, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co.  
Also: Frankl, Viktor, 1963. *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, New York: Washington Square Press.

# 20

## Paradox of the New Covenant

In this month's installment, we will look at a series of related Bible teachings which make no sense when taken at face value. To make sense of these teachings, we need another level of thinking. The difference between "nonsense" and "makes sense" mirrors the difference between the thinking inherent to the legalist system and the thinking required for understanding the New Covenant. Applying Old Covenant thinking to the New Covenant amounts to putting new wine in old skins, and makes a worse legalism yet, by converting the principles of faith to legalist structures.

First, we will briefly list and comment on the passages. The pattern of the list will appear readily. Then we will discuss the significance of this list of teachings.

1. *The first shall be last, and the last first* (Lk. 13:30; Mk. 10:36; Mt. 19:30; 20:16.).

Jesus uses this formula to conclude several parables. It serves as a "moral of the story," and helps us understand the point of the parables: those who thought first of themselves, and then -- if at all -- the needs of others, would be last at the judgement, i.e., rejected. *Dead last*, so to speak. The phrase also carries the meaning "whoever comes in first in this life will come in last at the judgement." If you want what this world has to offer, you already have your reward. When we, however, put ourselves last, we are actually making ourselves first in God's sight.

2. *He who loses his life will save it* (Mt. 10:38,39; 16:25).

This is similar in meaning to the above, but starkly stated. If you seek the favors of this life, you've thrown away eternal life. If you lose your life (for the sake of the gospel, a critical elipsis) you will actually find, or save it. This teaching comes with the warning, "There are some standing here who will not taste death ('lose' their lives) before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom" (Mt. 16:28). Living for the gospel means dying to the world. Jesus realized this saying when he remained on the cross, defying the taunts, "he saved others, let him save himself" (Lk. 23:35) and "let him come down now from the cross" (Mt. 26: 42). He found his life by losing it.

3. *Whoever would be great among you must be a slave* (Mt. 20: 26,27; Mk.10:44-45).

This is also similar to the first entry, but set as an exhortation, not a warning. This teaching comes in the context of the Sons of Zebedee's request to sit at Jesus' right hand in the kingdom. The Lord's reply teaches that rulership comes from service. Servantship is in fact rulership, rulership of one's own spirit.

4. *Become a fool to be wise* (I Cor. 3:18).

Here we have Paul writing to the Corinthians. Although Athens was the real intellectual seat of Greek culture, the issue of wisdom would still concern the less cultured Corinthians. Paul says that wisdom isn't wisdom, foolishness is wisdom. Of course the foolishness to which he refers is God's "*foolishness*:" a crucified Messiah, humility, meekness, giving up all in this life, etc. The way of life commensurate with the dynamics of the atonement in Christ made no sense in the linear, materialist Greek mind (identical to the Pharisees, in this respect). To the Greeks (and Pharisees) one gained wisdom by becoming wise. But one had to be wise enough to become foolish, for in becoming foolish (in the eyes of the world) one became wise. See also Matthew 11:25.

5. *Childlikeness is maturity* (Mt. 18:4)

The text actually says that whoever humbles himself like this child will be greatest in the Kingdom of heaven. Children aren't humble; they are totally self-centered. But Jesus isn't telling us to become childish; he's telling us to become like a child, or childlike. A child doesn't have all the answers. A child learns and grows with curiosity and a respect for the freshness of new experience. Adults think they have the answers, and they know what's what because now they're grown-up.

Many adults learn nothing because their "*knowledge*" has shut the doors and windows of the mind. This is really immature and not very adult. Choosing "*I want to find out*" in contrast with "*I already know*" is what Jesus is getting at here. The context of the rest of the chapter -- dealing with

interpersonal offenses and forgiveness -- tells us that the wisdom of this world is indeed lacking in this dimension. The little ones "*who believe in me*" that Jesus bids us receive in verse 5 *are not literal children*, but people who have chosen to humble themselves and become as children. Their belief doesn't make them perfect. In their struggles with sin, we will not reject them -- even unto seventy times seven times.

6. *When I am weak, then am I strong* (II Cor. 12:10).

Here we have the apostle Paul referring to his dependence upon God's great providence in dealing with his adversary. He cannot access this strength unless he is first made weak. He has to empty himself so God can fill him with power. In this context, God weakens Paul with affliction, and strengthens him with the power from above. Paul's weakness becomes his strength.

7. *Giving is getting* (II Cor. 8: 6-11; Prov. 11:24, 25).

The more we give, the more we get. But we cannot give with the intent to get, for just doing the behavior of giving doesn't count in the ethic of the New Covenant. The "*getting*" is the abundant resources to serve: God provides seed for the sower. We cannot get this seed, except by giving it with the right intent, which is purely for the service of others. We can't do this with an entirely pure conscience, because we are not pure beings. But God does see those glimpses of selflessness that show up from time to time in our lives, and He responds with more for us to give.

8. *Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled* (Lk. 14:11) and *humility is exaltation* (Mt. 18:4 Eph. 1:3-9).

We all know the future application of this teaching (e.g. Isa. 40:4). If we humble ourselves now, God will exalt us later – but only if we have shown a true humility, not a sham humility for the sake of gaining exaltation.

Another application of this principle becomes apparent when we consider this fact: when we develop true humility, that is, a real sense of place and space between ourselves and God, we reach a state of heart in which we can receive immediate exaltation. Why? Because we can only relate to God on the basis of a true assessment of who we are and who God is.

As we grow in this awareness, essentially placing ourselves further from God, we grow closer to Him. Thus we have a relationship which exalts us now to the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. We cannot decide to be humble, nor can we claim humility for the sake of becoming exalted. This would revert us back to the legalist cause-effect model. One can only grow in humility, and then move into the circle of humility-exaltation, to the extent of human limitations.

9. *The ungodly are just* (Rom. 4:5).

This teaching relates immediately, directly, and daily to our standing before God. It has everything to do with how we become righteous. We become righteous not by being righteous, which we can't, but by acknowledging our unrighteousness and accepting our dependence on the Father's mercy and forgiveness. Paul's passage in Romans cites Abraham's confession, "*he trusted him who justifies the ungodly.*" Paul also refers to David, who confessed his sins -- far more blatant and egregious than Abraham's -- and thus received mercy. Only in the Lord does this recognition of our unworthiness account for righteousness. Paul takes "*let us sin that grace may abound*" out of the equation in Romans 6:1, thus leaving us with a clean connection between recognizing our sin and finding righteousness in God. We cannot sin to obtain righteousness, nor can we do right to become righteous. When we confess "*I have sinned,*" then we don't have sin anymore, because God forgives sin when we acknowledge it and faithfully seek His mercy.

## **The Common Thread**

The above list surely is incomplete, but will suffice to demonstrate our point. All depend on an effect of opposites -- we get what we don't strive for. It seems we have to do the opposite of what we want, and the desired result comes indirectly. At the very least, the cumulative force of these structurally parallel passages teaches us that something extraordinary is going on. We are led to consider that we might find a line of thinking peculiar to the New Covenant that undergirds these passages. We are working our way up to understanding the nature of paradox.

True paradox is a recursive statement that lives in a circular (that is, without cause-effect status, but only a continuing system) world, without beginning or end, that represents the infiniteness of our God and His universe. Legalist thinking says, "*I'm righteous because I don't sin.*" Faithful thinking says, "*I'm righteous because I acknowledge my sin. But this must be a confession from the heart, not a mechanical*

*confession. Then I become righteous through faith, which makes me unrighteous again, because that righteousness states that I'm unrighteous -- only God is righteous. But that makes me righteous, which means I'm unrighteous."* So on it goes, only a continuous loop, not a cause-and-effect linearity that depends on the will of man as the cause.

## **The teaching of the teachings**

Thus we can derive the collective meaning of the list of passages. Each iteration provides a unique perspective for understanding -- it makes no sense in the materialist, legalist world in which our human nature wants to live. The statements demand we go into another realm of thinking. Unlike the black-and-white, linear, cause-and-effect world of the Old Covenant of works, the New Covenant of grace requires a special sense of our interrelationship with a limitless God. Our salvation becomes not a direct result of our own actions, but an indirect, passive consequence of our selfless lives given to God for the benefit of others.

The list of parallel teachings cited above could not occur as part of the teaching under the law. The type of thinking needed to make them work demands elevation to a higher order of perception and an entirely selfless application of their principles. One can't fake the New Covenant; one can't go through the meaningless charades of offering ritual sacrifice without a scantling of devotion or understanding. Nor can one do anything to cause righteousness; righteousness only comes indirectly from the realization of our unrighteousness. This is a basic fact, but we want to highlight the type of thinking fundamental to this indirect righteousness. One can only train the mind to God's eternal principles, and slowly learn that everything we naturally think is right, is not. We become void and powerless, and in our emptiness, we become filled.

Paradoxical teaching says that one cannot do anything to directly effect the result -- the result must happen as an indirect consequence. Note, however, this doesn't affect the concept of free choice. We choose each behavior. We make moral choices. We choose to be baptized, submitting to God's purpose. But we cannot choose, directly, to be saved. That comes as the indirect result of faith, service, and growth. Living in the New Covenant means far more than a set of beliefs and worship practices. We must do, but with no thought of doing (Mt. 25:37). Our doing must emanate from the affections of a mind trained on eternal values.

## **A law that bans law**

Jesus' enigmatic statement recorded in John 15:12 deserves special mention. *"A new command I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you."* As we noted in an earlier article (Jan/2000, *Works of Faith*), one cannot make a command to love, for if love comes by command, it isn't love. Love can only come as an internal operation of God's principles working within us to create a truly volitional desire to serve and worship.

So how can Jesus say it's a commandment?

We can paraphrase to clarify: *"I have only one law. That law says, there are no laws (since love cannot be commanded), there is only love."* If there is a law that says laws are *"illegal,"* then are there any laws? Yes, the law that says so. No, because there aren't any laws. Yes. No. Yes. No.

A never ending circle of a self-contained paradoxical saying. To understand teachings of this sort we must remove ourselves from the Greek/Pharisaic cause-effect linearity and enter the circular, interactive world of Biblical thought.

God's thinking should stretch us. *"My ways are not your ways,"* said the Lord God by Isaiah. Is it not far more likely that we would attempt to lower His teaching to concrete human levels than to try to grasp, even if dimly, the Divine mind? Understanding the paradoxical nature of the New Covenant is a good place to start elevating our minds.

# 21

## Contrasting the Legal and Faithful Minds – Part 1

We have said from the beginning of the series that to see faith better, we need to know its opposite, legalism. In this article we will take a close look at the contrasting mental operations of the legalist and a believer, whom we will call a "*faithist*." Figuratively peering inside the skull, we want to find out what beliefs make each of them function the way they do. By expanding into many dimensions of legalism and faith and their outgrowths in life, we can both clarify the entire scope of our problem and summarize and review the material we have presented thus far.

### Legalism opposite of spirituality

Faithism is unnatural; the Bible calls it "*spirituality*," the opposite of carnal thinking (I Cor. 2:14, etc.). Recognizing the legalism that so easily creeps into our lives and worship starts our journey to spirituality. The analysis may appear a tad harsh, and if so, it's only because of our innate and cultural bias to legalism. We have two options to lessen the impact of this article. One, we can replace "*Legalist*" with "*Pharisee*" at the top of the left-hand column of the lists below. We can easily see the Pharisee in the left-hand list, and that provides a safe distance between us and the pointed wording. Although many of the scriptural examples of legalistic thinking and practice will come from the Pharisees, it's not meant for them; they are long gone.

Another option is to read the left-hand column and think of people whom we know who seem to fit the description. That's also safe; it allows us to apply it to today's house of God, but not to us personally. Again, some of the examples may lead us to think of certain people. However, if we have pegged anyone for the legalist side, we belong there, too, for "*judgmental*" certainly belongs to the realm of the legalist. By no means do we intend to inculcate anyone; we can only point out areas where some good introspective thinking might yield the full benefits of the faith.

Not knowing the drivers of anyone's faith and the outworking of their spiritual journey, we dare not equate any observation of behavior as necessarily legalistic. Use the list only for your own personal assessment – that's the only arena a faithist has interest in anyway.

## Who we are, or who we aren't

We really aren't very close at all to the Pharisees if we look at the overall picture of our spiritual house. We might say we're a million miles away, but a million miles might still be too close. We started with the covenant of grace, and they with the covenant of works. *Turning grace into law constitutes a far worse sin than adding to an already dead covenant of works.* New Testament legalism corrupts grace, a far more serious matter (Heb. 6:4-6, Gal. 4:9-11). With grace as a starting point, any backsliding into legalistic practice becomes reason for distress. We want to maintain faith, and keep ourselves from apostatizing into a religion of works and ritual.

"*Not being a Pharisee*" might make a good start, but it won't do for a goal. The Pharisees defined themselves by who they weren't more than who they were. Witness the "*confession*" in Luke 18:9-12:

*"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee that I am not as other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice in the week, and I give tithes of all that I possess."*

But we can sound like this:

*"And a Christadelphian went to meeting and prayed thus, 'Yahweh, I thank thee that I am not as other men, adulterers, Catholics, or even this Pharisee here, because I know the TRUTH. I go to Bible class twice a week, I do the daily readings, and put money in the collection. Therefore, I have earned a place in your kingdom.'"*

Do we define ourselves by who we aren't? Not a good idea, for legalism has other adherents besides the Pharisees. Not belonging to them doesn't give us faith.

## The list of contrasts

Key beliefs lead to others, and we will attempt to logically link the connections. First, we'll just list the contrasts as a series of opposing, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, pairs. Some of the legalist problem only accrues as a matter of emphasis or priority. We all need to deal with our behavior, for instance, but the legalist emphasizes behavior to the exclusion of attitude. We all need book learning, but the legalist sees this as an end itself, not as part of the growth process. What can appear as subtle distinctions to men turn out as different as sheep and goats in the eyes of the judge who sees to the depths of our souls.

<b>LEGAL MIND</b>	<b>FAITHFUL MIND</b>
1. sin comes from without	acknowledges own sin
2. avoids to protect from sin	overcomes to protect from sin
3. narrow-minded, restrictive	broad-minded, free
4. many rules and do not's	few rules, mostly dos
5. few useful works	many useful works
6. thinks works provide favor	works out of thanksgiving
7. makes and follows rules	follows principles
8. fears change, new ideas	adapts and grows with change
9. adheres to tradition	evaluates and utilizes tradition appropriately
10. content thinker	process thinker
11. focuses on things	focuses on thoughts
12. concerned with behavior	concerned with attitude and values
13. fears uncertainty & ambiguities	comfortable with uncertainties & ambiguities
14. forces scruples on others	works on own peculiarities
15. fears failure	takes risks of faith
16. fears rejection	accepts God's grace
17. insists all maintain same rules	allows for varying levels of growth
18. no spiritual regeneration	spiritual growth
19. absolute, finite knowledge	relative, expanding knowledge
20. academic learning gives salvation	learning leads to faith
21. claims purity and holiness	makes no claims, but lives holily
22. pride	abasement
23. hypocrite	forgiven sinner

**Locus of Sin (development of 1.)**

Legalist thought centers on belief in external uncleanness – that sin does lie outside of oneself. We have covered this point repeatedly in previous articles (e.g., *"Clean and Unclean,"* 6/00). For the legalist, the belief in external uncleanness begets a sequence of theological nonsense (including belief in a corporeal devil) and vain attempts at righteousness. Every entry on the above list flows directly from this fundamental error. We know that our first principle declares that we are unclean by nature (Rom. 3:19, 5:20, etc.). The recognition that sin is an internal matter of the flesh stands at the core of our need for mercy.

How does confession sound coming from a legalist? How can one reach the depths of need when the real problem isn't you, but only what you contacted? The faithist knows that while the world has many temptations, *the real problem is within*. His confession says, *"be merciful to me, a sinner."*

Mistaking the enemy engenders misguided effort. Our own human nature and habituated sin constitutes the enemy. If we look elsewhere, we'll fight the wrong battle, as if we really did believe in an external devil, whether it be TV or Catholicism. If we conquer flesh, we can deal with any circumstances and distractions of life.

## Avoidance (2.)

Believing that some things out there really are inherently sinful, avoidance strategies rank high for the legalist, and these require vigilant cataloging and labeling. *"This is good, this is bad."* Things, objects, people, activities become subject to ritual rejection. The Pharisees' avoidance agenda listed certain foods, people, clothes, work, houses, and so on. Our lists tend more to entertainment and educational choices, career goals, and only occasionally do we trivialize down to dress styles and facial hair and holiday observances. Nonetheless, it's usually not too hard to find someone who's glad to tell us what evil to avoid, but it's all a vain attempt at creating holiness in the heart (Col. 2:20-23).

The faithist knows problems come from within, not from the environment (Mk. 7:20, 21). This fundamental first principle applies to daily life. No amount of avoiding can make him clean or give him a reward; he knows that he doesn't avoid anything for the sake of staying undefiled, but carefully nourishes his spiritual growth through wise choices. The faithist also knows not to avoid something because it is evil, which it isn't, but only to involve himself in practices and activities that promote spiritual growth -- *we call this overcoming, not avoiding* (Rom. 13:10). You outgrow TV, for instance, rather than preach its evils, which might actually get people interested in watching (Rom. 7:8,9, same principle at work).

## Restrictions (3., 5.)

With so many potential external defilements, the legalist lives in a narrow, self-restricted world. The faithist, not ruled by fear of defilement, lives in a free and open world (Rom. 14:2) and that gives him many more options for growth and service. We offer again the Samaritan story to illustrate different opportunities for service and helping. The Pharisee's narrow\* world didn't include bloodied persons, sinners, Gentiles, and many other people and things. They achieved monasticism through the law, without the inconvenience of the Essenes' troglodytic lifestyle.

The faithist has a broad\* view of the world because he sees in it opportunities for learning, growth, and service. The legalist, who has no structure or strategy for growth, but only follows rules, sees no need for this. He doesn't want to overcome, he wants to avoid. Moreover, because he lives in a much wider world, the faithist can help far more people than the legalist, who is quite busy enough making sure his napkin stays clean.

\* This might sound opposed to the oft-cited *"straight and narrow"* directive; however, that phrase doesn't occur in Scripture. People wrest it from Matthew 7:14, which refers to a narrow gate and a *strait* (difficult), not *straight* way. The *gate* (faith in Christ) is narrow, as it's the only way to the Kingdom. The *way* is difficult (not narrow) through trials of faith (see meaning of the Gr. word for *"strait"*). The teaching refers to the way of life that few would find, but has no reference to legalistic constrictions of our behavior. (See RSV or Greek text for details.)

### Rules (4., 6., 7.)

We have spared no print in earlier articles detailing the excesses of the Pharisees' rule-making. Rules, rituals, and rewards form the three pillars of legalism. Rules typically fall into the category of *dos* and *do not*s. *Do not*s address the need for avoidance of the unclean, and *dos* address the need for ritualistic justification. Neither of these have much usefulness, as does preaching, teaching, and looking after another's welfare. Legalists don't really help anyone.

*Do not* rules create an ersatz faith (Col. 2:20-23) and inhibit spiritual growth. Christadelphian *do* rules tend toward the legislation of worthwhile activities: do the readings, attend class, go to meeting, serve the ecclesias, etc. Necessary activities all, but thinking that they are commands to be ticked off so that one pleases God reduces them to works of the flesh.

The faithist has few rules, mostly *dos*, which he uses as expedients to develop good spiritual habits. Moreover, he keeps his rules strictly for his own personal improvement. He knows that he gains no credits toward the kingdom, nor does he expect anyone else to abide by his rules.

The faithist lives by principles, not rules. These in turn motivate the necessary behaviors of spiritual life. He knows that attending meeting has spiritual benefits -- learning, worship, fellowship and service -- he's there because he wants to be there, not because he's supposed to be there. While the legalist thinks that works provide -- or even guarantee -- favor with God, a faithist principle such as "*I owe my existence to the Creator*" surpasses countless rules in effecting godly behavior. Thanksgiving (Psa. 50:14, 23) motivates the works of the faithist. With spiritual development and service as highly-placed values, the necessary behaviors fall accordingly into place. A legalist does ritual and avoidance works in order to obtain salvation; a faithist does useful works because God has already provided salvation through faith in Christ.

### Change (8., 9.)

The legalist lexicon lacks this word. Things that people avoid don't change--if something is unclean, it's unclean. So the need for personal change evaporates. Synonymous with change, the legalist does not have the word *growth* in his dictionary either. Just identify and avoid. So the legalist looks upon any kind of change as suspect, unhealthy, regressive, and unnecessary. After decades in the Truth, a legalist still functions at the same level as when newly baptized.

By contrast, the faithist loves the concept of change because he continually changes. As he grows to higher levels of spirituality, his modes of worship, prayer, study, and service will also take new forms. Ideas once thought unworkable become incorporated into his life. This doesn't mean all changes are good. However good change is necessary.

The "*no change*" mind set of the legalist is a ripe breeding ground for thoughtless adherence to tradition. When a practice or belief goes untested and maintains its life only because "*that's what we've always done (or believed)*," then that's a potentially unhealthy tradition. Such esteem for tradition (Mk. 7:8) blinded the Pharisees to the

real word of God. Let this serve as a lesson and warning to us. Any belief or practice requires evaluation for truth and spiritual utility before we hold it fast (I Thess. 5:21).

# 22

## Contrasting the Legal and Faithful Minds – Part 2

### Content vs. process thinking (development of 10)

The legalist, with his focus on ritual and external evils, needs to categorize every object and activity in his world as "*clean*" or "*unclean*." He focuses on the external object, not on the relationship of the object to the person. The faithist believes the New Testament teaching that evil comes from within; all things remain clean if used properly. Thus, the faithist focuses not on the external object, but on the use of the object, that is, the relationship between user and external object. The legalist focuses on the "*what*," the faithist on the "*how*." If you ask a legalist if something is good or bad, he'll give you an answer. If you ask a faithist the same questions, you'll only get "*depends*."

Another way of describing this dynamic is concrete vs. abstract thinking. The legalist only sees the what, the faithist sees the how. Let's look at an example that's sure to get some folks riled up. It's about modern versions of the Bible. In this somewhat trivial example, the "*what*" in question is the form of words.

Many people favor the King James Version language over "*modern versions*" but that's a content distinction. The KJV fits the criterion for "*modern*" 400 years ago. At that time, it was translated into modern English, so at a process level, it's modern. To produce an "*old-fashioned*" version you must deliberately use out-of-date word forms, use meanings of words that have no current application, and ignore textual scholarship of the past few centuries. Words themselves like "*makest*" and "*thou*" and "*waxeth*" and "*concupiscence*" sound old-fashioned but were common currency when the translators used them 400 years ago.

There's nothing special about "*thou*." In the language of 400 years ago, it was not used as a formal word or special address for God. In fact neither Hebrew, Greek nor King James English have formal pronouns; the same second person pronoun suffices for God and man alike. Some use "*thou*" in prayer, others find it unsuitable; to each his own on this matter. It's only when people think that the word itself has something holy or special about it that we have a problem. People who do use "*thou*" and similar anachronisms in prayer should know these linguistic artifacts have no basis in scripture.\* Whether we say "*thou*" or "*you*," we all pray for the glory of God.

Other examples of content thinking get us in much worse trouble in areas far too involved to discuss here, such as the atonement and remarriage.

\*(N.B.)What's really a problem is lack of thought and the mere repetition of cliches dressed in supposedly "holy" language. A brother is called on to give a prayer, and immediately rattles off -- without a moment of thought or meditation -- a string of KJV language and banal catch-phrases. Or the hymn ends, and without a moment for setting one's mind on the awesome task of addressing the Creator, here come the words, just the same words. How can one pray and have any meaning doing this? It's the attitude of mind (the process) that's critical in prayer, no matter how eloquent (the content) may be the words.

### **Fears (13)**

The legalist has several life-consuming fears. Fear of uncertainty and ambiguity, fear of failure and rejection, and fear of God. No, not the awe of God, but being afraid of God, in the sense that one is afraid of an angry superior. The faithist, on the other hand, lives in awe of God, and has a profound respect -- for God's power, goodness, and mercy. The faithist can live with the uncertainties and ambiguities of life because he knows that the omnipotent God -- not himself, his own pharisaical God -- really controls the universe.

Fear of ambiguity and uncertainty stems from the fundamental belief in external evil. Because the world has so many defilements, it's vitally important to carefully and precisely box everything -- leave nothing to chance or doubt. When in doubt, cast it out, but leave nothing to uncertainty. The legalist fears the undefined because it could let something unclean in through the door.

### **Scruples (11, 12, 14, 17)**

Fear of ambiguity shows up when one tries to foist -- or force -- one's scruples on others. This happens when we focus on the external thing, not one's relationship to it. If something is unclean, then it must be unclean for everyone. But the faithist knows that the New Covenant has

much inherent ambiguity. For instance, Paul says it's fine to get married, but better, to stay unmarried (I Cor. 7:38). Some people celebrate a day (which might include hauling a tree into the house), some don't (Rom. 14:6); both receive approval. Some, "the weak," eat only vegetables, others eat anything (Rom. 14:2). Some bring forth sixty-fold, some thirty, some a hundred (Mt. 13:8); God accepts them all.

We have one standard -- the perfection of Christ -- but many individual approaches. Paul's lack of precise definition when dealing with matters of scruples would have totally unwound the true legalists who read his letters. Paul wouldn't say, "*meat offered to idols is unclean.*" Instead he said, "*maybe, depends on your attitude and circumstances.*" He allowed for different content standard (food clean or unclean), but the same process standard (spiritual growth). But the legalist only looks at the content and sees ambiguity, which scares him.

Thus, the legalist desires to export his weaknesses. If it's unclean for him, then it must be for everyone. If TV is bad for him, it's bad for everyone. If taking a psychology

class in college -- or even going to college at all -- represents an *"evil"* to the legalist, then it's verboten for all. Differing levels of faith and practice make no sense in the absolute world of the legalist.

The faithist keeps his faith to himself (Rom. 14:22), and he's perfectly happy to allow others their scruples. He has no fear of ambiguity because he knows that we all grow at different rates toward an infinite standard, and of course ecclesial and personal life will have their uncertainties in language, form of worship, dress, style, musical taste, and so many other variables. The faithist knows that ecclesial life goes much easier when we tolerate other's scruples and keep ours to ourselves. He fears not, because most of those scruples focus on content, on things, and not on issues of faith. God controls all, anyway, and we don't have to iron out every little wrinkle.

### **Fear of failure and rejection (15, 16)**

Law and grace oppose and mutually exclude each other. The legalist, being under law, has a hefty load of ritual observance and defilement-avoiding to get his reward. Thus, he has a fear-based religion. If he doesn't do right, he has no grace. He only has his own works, and that's no easy task, given the huge legalist structure he has built. The legalist lives in constant fear of something going wrong -- missing a ritual, contacting a defilement, doing something wrong. This fear leads to the restrictive life we treated earlier; it also leads to a dreadful misconception of our loving heavenly Father.

In the parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14-30), we have one man afraid to risk his money. The other did risk much, for no one in business doubles his investment without considerable risk-taking. One made ten talents of five, the other four of two; the exact amount (content) is unimportant. They must have loved their master and trusted that even if their ventures failed, he would accept them. But the man who hid his talent for fear of losing it, didn't even avail himself of a safe investment. He had no trust or love for his master. He only had fear that if he failed, he would incur his master's ire. Therefore, at all costs, he refrained from doing bad. His definition of a good work -- preserving what his master gave him -- reflects the legalist thinking, *"avoid evil and I'm okay."* His conception of God did not inspire him to do anything useful at all. His fear of God was entirely the wrong kind of fear.

The legalist is truly afraid of God because he has made a God in his own image, an imaginary idol of fleshly ideology and attributes. The God of the legalist is vengeful, offendable, and irascible. He doles out rewards only to those who have earned it. Keep him happy, or else. So he fears God just as he would a powerful human tyrant.

The faithist serves a loving father. He operates from a basis of respect, love, and trust. His belief in providence and forgiveness supports the mandatory risks of faith so that he can lead a productive and useful life. Think of Abraham as an example of risk-taking, and you'll know the power of one's conception of God to control the destiny of life.

## Regeneration (18)

At this point in our discussion, we've pretty much painted the picture. Suffice it to say that following laws and rules only yields stenosis and stagnation, not spiritual growth. The concept of moral regeneration -- the only answer to the evil within us -- has no basis in the legalist construct of external evil.

## Knowledge (19,20)

Even Jesus commended the Pharisees' Bible knowledge (Mt. 23:2); what they did with it led to their downfall. Knowledge (content) can yield faith, or it can yield laws. It's how we use it (process) that counts. To the legalist, the acquisition of knowledge is an end in itself. Christadelphians have a wonderful tradition of scholarship and Bible study. If we use it to build faith, well.

The oft-heard phrase "*wise unto salvation*" is wrested Scripture. The complete phrase reads, "*wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus*" (II Tim. 3:15). Pox on any Christadelphian who substitutes knowledge for faith in Christ as the basis of salvation!

The faithist also knows that the more he knows, the more he knows how much he doesn't know. Good Bible study makes a very humble disciple. He who reads with the intent to learn faith gains much character. He who reads with the intent to use knowledge itself for self-aggrandizement, ecclesial power, or the ego of wisdom is a fool.

## Claims of "purity" (21)

A writing device used by John in his first epistle separates the claims of the pseudo-pure from the lives of the truly godly. The apostle often uses the phrase "*If we say...*" to start the negative line of a contrasting ethical couplet (cp. 1:6 with 1:7; 1:8 & 10 with 1:9; 2:4 with 2:5; and 2:9 with 2:10). Some people claim purity, others just do it, quietly leading lives that reflect the work of God in their hearts. We have no need, like the Pharisees, to stand up for the "*purity of the truth.*" No human can sully God's inviolate truth. Claiming to uphold purity amounts to nothing -- doesn't everyone believe they uphold "*pure truth*"? Who among us would claim that he doesn't stand for true apostolic religion?

A believer who lets God rule in his heart has no need for claims, because his life speaks for itself. Moreover, because it's God's purity, not his, the faithist knows that he, of himself, cannot have or hold God's purity purely. Paradoxically, we uphold the purity by recognizing that as humans, we can only impurely reflect God's ineffable truth.

**Pride & hypocrisy (22, 23)**

The end of the legalist approach comes to, "*I did thus and so; I obeyed the rules.*" No manner of humility of character can reverse the consequences of self-justification. You have taken God and grace out of the picture, and made salvation a matter of your own doing. This defines pride. However, because no one can fully do right, we have the blotches which lead to "*hypocrite,*" Jesus' special cognomen for the Pharisees.

Hypocrisy happens this way: we establish a rule, and attempt to keep it. Maybe we do, but even if so, God extrapolates from the specific behavior of the rule to the ethos represented by the rule, and then He holds us entirely responsible for keeping that (Rom. 2:22, etc.). If we preach against stealing, but "*steal*" time from God by wasting our life on trivial pastimes, then God holds us guilty of stealing. If we believe very strongly against adultery, God will hold us accountable for every lust of the eye which leads to the adultery of the heart. Then we become hypocrites. We claim adherence to a law, but fall down in another application of the same principle.

Should we adopt consistent immorality to avoid hypocrisy? God forbid! Instead, we search for the perfect standard of Christ, and devote our lives to growing into his character, relying on his grace to cover us in the process. Forming character, not following laws, cannot lead to hypocrisy, because we know that we are a work in progress.

**Summary**

The end of the parable in Luke 18 makes a convenient conclusion to our discussion of the legal mind in contrast to the faithful mind. The man who dared not compare himself with others or trumpet his good works, but only begged for mercy with his head bowed, went home justified. It's really all we need to know, isn't it? The power of accurate theology and confession, not his good works, saved him. To those with heads bowed in the true humility of contrition Jesus gives the exhortation, "*Lift up your head, for your redemption draws nigh*" (Lk. 21:28).

# 23

## Necessary Things

While we have been saying throughout the series that the New Covenant functions by faith, not laws, we would not want to imply that this equates to anarchy. Nor do the three "Rs" of legalism -- rules, rituals, and rewards -- entirely lack utility. Contrariwise, we have appropriate uses for all of them. Two spiritual reasons, and at least one practical reason, direct the religious institution known as the Body of Christ to function according to rules. We will also have a few words to say about the use of rules and rewards in personal development, and the importance of ritual in our worship.

### Freedom to use rules

Let's turn our attention to ecclesial and inter-ecclesial operations. An ecclesia represents both a spiritual and a human organization, and, as such, acquiesces to spiritual and organizational principles to function properly. Foremost for this discussion is the principle that allows us even to consider organizational rules as part of our ecclesial operations. This is our first spiritual reason, and the same Bible principle that establishes the internal locus of sin also qualifies us to operate in the world of rules, constitutions, and policies.

This principle, developed at length in article 18, "*Clean and Unclean*", states that sin does not lie in those things external to us, but rather in the attitudes and values of our hearts. Thus, rules, constitutions, and the like cannot be inherently sinful, nor does using them make one righteous or unrighteous. They only occupy a neutral position, awaiting either our spiritual application or our legalistic abuse. Like anything else, a rule or ritual cannot sin, nor can it be sin. Only the human heart can do these things.

The most important scriptural principle concerning the subject of ecclesial organization tells us that organizational rules or worship rituals have no inherent goodness or badness. Therefore, we have freedom to use them if they further our spiritual goals.

### Submission

The second spiritual principle comes from Biblical teachings concerning the discipleship practice of mutual submission (Eph. 5:21). Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, covers many aspects of unity. He addresses unity between God and man, between Jew and Gentile, between members of the body of Christ, and between husband and wife. Each of these relationships depends on creating unity and harmony

between disparate members. This is especially true in the ecclesia, a multitudinous arrangement with potential for either enormous benefit or considerable stress.

A structured ecclesia creates opportunities for the practice of submission. It's easy to have an *"everyone does what's right in their own eyes"* situation when the ecclesia, or any inter-ecclesial structure, has no guidelines. Garbed in gossamer freedom, we find that the structureless organization loses not only its character and boundaries, but it also denies its membership the discipleship of submission for mutual good.

Submission to others' wills and preferences can occur in any social organization. Personalities, emotions, and lapses in interpersonal communication, however, add complexity to the issue at hand. Submission becomes clouded, and withdrawal often gains ascendancy as an easier solution to what has become an engaged conflict.

However, when we add a formalized, codified policy to guide the organization, we now have an impersonal, impartial arbiter which excludes personality conflicts. One can submit, or one can depart in a cloud of pride and self-righteousness.

Perhaps the written guideline that led to conflict or departure had no utility. Perhaps less-than-spiritual principles led to the formation of the rules in question in the first place. Even better for the practice of submission. When you submit to a good, principled policy, is that really submission? Submitting because you hold the weaker position hardly counts as submission; that's just common sense. If the policy has good spiritual backing, then what justification have you for opposing it? However, if you submit after demonstrating the spiritual superiority of your position, then that counts for true submission.

### **I'm above the rules**

We also often have to deal with the *"rules don't apply to me"* mindset. Bible school committee members know this one all too well. Who really thinks that the curfew applies to them? No, it's for other people, not me. Four hundred people at a Bible school with rules for the common good, and hardly any think the rules apply to them. I don't have to wear my name badge, or be in my room by 11. Twenty minutes for an exhortation? Maybe the other speakers, not me. I've got important things to say.

The rules do apply to you, and to your children. Make sure they know that the rules apply to them also. And make sure they know why they must follow the rules -- to practice submission and set the right example for others -- not to gain admission to the kingdom of God. Your paltry works do not impress God; He's delighted with your submissive spirit.

So ecclesial rules give us the opportunity for true submission, the kind of unjust, unwarranted, self-crucifying submission that led our Lord to the cross for us. Submission probably ranks as our least favorite lesson in discipleship, and is therefore the one we need the most opportunity to practice.

## **Group behavior**

Now we come to a human reason for the application of rules to our organization, the issue of group behavior. The simple rule of human behavior is this: in groups, behavior degrades. People lose their values, sensibility, and priorities. We observe this phenomenon primarily, but not exclusively, in teens and young adults. Take any ten people, individually well-bred and thoughtful, and put them together in a group. Behavior immediately dissipates. Even a strong leader can do little to counter the inevitable decay of principles within a group.

Thus, you have to deal with the group mentality, not individual mentalities, when creating structures and guidelines for events such as Bible schools and youth weekends. Organizers learn to over-govern and over-regiment, simply because they must. You just can't expect the crowds to help with any kind of voluntary compliance, let alone spontaneously do what needs to be done.

At home, most people would do something as simple and reasonable as pick up their hymn book off the floor. But look at the room after a session at a gathering or youth weekend -- hardly anyone does, because, well, everybody else's books are all over the floor, so why should I pick up mine? Likewise with curfews, starting times for meetings, and dozens of other details.

People in groups don't behave the way they ought. Distractions come easily. We don't want to appear like we're the only one so weak as to want to help the organizers by submitting to their agenda. Yet that's exactly the recipe for a good function: each individual submitting his or her will to the minutiae the organizers have had to place on the event to keep necessary order in a large group of disparate human agendas and preferences.

Any organizer knows that to get results at, say, a level of 50, you have to organize at a level of 100. This isn't legalistic; it's just recognizing the inherent difficulties of dealing with group behavior.

## **Master or servant?**

The key issue regarding any set of rules, an ecclesial constitution, the operating protocols of a gathering, the Bible school bylaws, or any enactment of regulations depends on how we use them. We can keep one priority in mind: Do we use rules to serve us, or have we become enslaved to them?

We become slaves to rules when we cannot change them or lift them under special circumstances. When the *"letter of the law"* eclipses human need, then we know we have reversed our roles, and the rules rule us. No longer are rules our servants to help us learn spiritual thinking; they have taken on their own life and trapped us. Rules must serve, not enslave.

Let's look at an example. Suppose your ecclesia has a rule that says the arranging board must approve visiting speakers by Friday for Sunday's meeting. A brother, who happens to have excellent exhortational skills, has a disruption of some business travel plans and ends up unexpectedly at your meeting on Sunday morning with no advance notice. Do you ask him to speak, or defer to your rule? If the rule wins, only because

it is the rule, then that rule has enslaved you. If you realize that circumstances warrant a suspension of what otherwise would keep things orderly, then you have realized that rules cannot cover all human expediencies; sometimes we must make an exception. Thus, you suspend the rule and welcome the sudden visitor to speak. You're not breaking a rule, you are only realizing that the wisdom of establishing the rule simply couldn't predict all possible circumstances of life, and therefore you suspend the rule for this instance.

## **Statement of faith**

Some people balk at the idea of a statement of faith; they might sophisticatedly tap their Bible and proclaim, "*This is my statement of faith,*" or declare the statement of faith a legalist structure. A statement of faith, however, has no inherent moral value one way or the other – it's how we use it that makes it good or bad. Just like rules, a statement of faith can be a servant or a master.

All brothers and sisters -- whether supporters or detractors of the statement of faith -- should recognize its limitations. We often hear the phrase, "*It's just a manmade document.*" Unlike an ecclesial constitution, however, it is not a manmade document in the same sense. It's a manmade collection of divine teachings. If it has a limitation, it's in the selection of articles, not the articles themselves. For instance, the BASF (Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith) fails to mention the fundamental first principle of salvation by grace. It has no definition of faith, and hardly a sufficient statement of salvation by faith. But such limitations do not detract from its utility. As we all know, or ought to know, faith does not come in a statement. Faith comes in a relationship with God, and that's what God reckons as righteousness.

We don't use the statement as the basis of our salvation, however, or at least we shouldn't. We use it as a convenient summary of our beliefs, and as a token of our membership in a cohesive community. Those who adhere to the BASF don't regard it as a replacement for their personal faith or as a definitive distillation of all necessary and saving truth. Even if it were the perfect distillation, believing it still wouldn't be the demonstration of faith about which the Bible talks. We do, however, use the BASF as a token to represent our allegiance to a cohesive inter-ecclesial structure known by the biblical concept of "*The Body of Christ.*"

Any worldwide body that espouses a uniform creed probably requires a statement of faith. Of course we could revise and improve ours. Even as it is, it serves its primary purpose of identifying and unifying its adherents. A statement cannot be a legalist structure in itself, though we can use it that way. Ideally, we use it as a servant for our edification, unification, and growth.

## **Rituals**

The New Covenant has a paucity of ritual. We have but two, baptism and the breaking of bread. The former we do only once, and we have carefully stated our teaching position on this matter: immersion in water does not save us; faith saves us. Immersion serves as a public and discrete sign of our faith, a remembrance for reflection, a rite of inclusion into the family of God, an act of submission to the righteousness of God, and many other purposes. It does not serve as a law we fulfil for the sake of earning a credit or reward from God. The proper attitude of baptism includes our inability to make ourselves right before God except by His grace.

Unlike baptism, the breaking of bread comes on our schedules every week. We will confine our remarks on the breaking of bread service to that which pertain to our theme of the correct use of ritual. God gave us this service to remember; it can aid as a tangible cue, or stimulus to trigger thoughts of penitence, devotion, thankfulness, grace, resolve and commitment. Only to the extent that our minds generate spiritual thinking does this service hold any benefit for us. We do not do it as a command to follow for the sake of earning righteousness. We do not do it as a legalistic duty, such as paying our tithes. We do not do it thinking, *"I have faithfully broken bread on the first day of the week, per the Lord's directive."* Any member can break bread; the behavior itself means no more than anyone going under water. Just as we emphasize proper understanding for the efficacy of baptism, we emphasize proper understanding for the breaking of bread. We could perhaps preface all the various thoughts relating to the work of Christ with this paraphrased maxim: The breaking of bread was made for man, not man for the breaking of bread.

## **Children**

Children need rules. We know this both from the Bible (Gal. 3:24 *"schoolmaster"* (KJV) = *paidagogos*, *"child trainer"*), and from developmental psychology. Children live in the world of the tangible, not the abstract. Principles don't help us until we reach early teenage years, and then we're so full of hormones and social influence that we use our newly developed powers of abstract reasoning only intermittently for another decade. Some time about our early twenties we actually start to mature.

Children need rules for several reasons. As young children, we don't know right from wrong. We can't figure out things like *"submission"* and *"faith."* We live in a world of objects and behavior, the same realm as the law. That's why Paul teaches allegorically in Galatians that law belongs to childhood, just as the law of Moses belonged to Israel's childhood.

Laws can teach us right behavior, and habituate us to proper conduct. We can, as children, learn to put money regularly into the collection. We don't learn about faithful generosity until we reach maturity. We have many rules for children to keep them orderly and to teach them -- at a behavioral level -- what's acceptable and what's not. Just as the law can only prescribe behavior, not attitude, rules alone cannot make children into adults. Rules can function at the only level children understand, and give them a good start toward understanding God and principles later in life.

Likewise, rewards have a useful place in child development. As adults living by faith, we have decided to forego present reward as a principle of reinforcing right behavior. In fact, the essence of faith precludes reward. Faith deals with delayed gratification -- waiting until later, and hoping that God will recognize our commitment. Those under the law believed God blessed them -- materially -- now for following His rules. Those under the mature concept of faith know that they might live their entire lives without any tangible reward or reinforcement, and then die in faith and hope.

Don't expect this level of abstraction from children. Reward them for their little efforts at doing good.

**Rules have a place**

Rules (and rituals) have a significant place in our worship and spiritual growth. They organize human behavior, give us opportunity to practice submission, offer reminders of the spiritual, and train children in the way of righteousness.

Ecclesial constitutions, the statement of faith, bylaws, and articles of incorporation all have a necessary position. They themselves are neither good nor bad; they're just external features. How we use them determines their spiritual value. Having freedom in Christ, we are free to make and use rules and guidelines.

The same caveats apply to our own rules as to the law of Moses. We can falsely think that in the keeping of them we create righteousness. We can let them enslave us with their immutability. We can add and clarify and expand them until we have defined everything, in a vain attempt to regulate morality and thought and behavior which only faith and love can properly regulate. We can fall into the trap, like the Pharisees, of actually voiding God's principles for the sake of keeping our own rules. We can blaspheme the covenant of grace by thinking that in following our rules and believing our creeds we have fulfilled the command to live by faith.

The slide back into legalism comes very easily, and the presence of rules and regulations, necessary as they are in a human organization, presents us with just as much opportunity to regress to legalism as to grow in faith. Rules present us with a challenge; like sin, we master it, or it will master us.

# 24

## Keeping Faith

A young man emerged from a cold pond on a Sunday morning, a new brother in Christ. Later that day, after the evening lecture, an older brother, at least thirty years his senior in the faith, said this to him: *"If the kingdom were to come right now, you'd be the person most likely to get in, because you haven't had time to sin yet."* Unlearned and inexperienced, the young man didn't know what to say, but it stuck in his mind. Years later, the theological naivete of the statement began to bother him. Was this just an idle, encouraging remark, or did it represent conventional Christadelphian thinking?

During his pondering, he heard this account from a woman who spoke about growing up Catholic. As a child she went to confession Saturday evening, came home and went straight to bed before she could sin! Then, at Sunday mass she could take communion undefiled. The elder brother in Christ expressed the same theological understanding as the little Catholic girl. They could both join with the pious Pharisee, biding away his Sabbath in inertness, waiting for sunset so he could enter another mark of pseudo-righteousness into his resume. All three made the same fundamental error about the nature of sin: that it is something we can avoid, and having so avoided, we can stand *"clean"* before God. The Truth says that sin dwells in us. We cannot avoid it. God offers us thorough cleansing in Christ, and our good works of faith show our understanding of His grace. We can't do good works while we're sleeping, or while we're hiding from ritual defilement. Nor can we do one great work, and call it a career.

God has called us to grow in faith. We grow in faith by doing faithful things. By now we know well what faith isn't; it's time to talk about what faith is. Doing faith will take a different course for each disciple, so we have no specific prescription. We will offer many examples, but none of these may be your gift and calling in Christ.

### Determinants of Faith

We know that we must show, or prove, our faith through our works (Jas. 2:20-24). How do we know when we have done a work of faith rather than a dead work of the law? We can use six criteria to help establish a work of faith: (1) risk-taking, (2) utility, (3) motive, (4) spirituality, (5) delayed reward, (6) personal hardship. If an activity meets all six criteria, we're probably safe to call it a work of faith. Unfortunately, due to our self-deception (Jer. 17:9) and limited perspective (I Cor. 4:4), we can never judge our attitudes perfectly. Only the perfect judge can truly know our hearts, but our limitation doesn't mitigate our need to strive always to see ourselves more clearly.

## **Risk taking**

The first criterion, or test of faith, we call risk-taking. Faith isn't faith unless it involves that element of the unknown. We must go beyond the comfort zone into that scary area called "*out of control*" or "*uncertainty*."

We know that ultimately God is in control, but we don't know the extent to which He will let us falter and suffer before He steps in. Abraham went beyond the comfort zone and into the faith zone when he left Ur. Jesus went there on Calvary. The faithful servants went there when they invested their money (Mt. 25:16). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego went there in the furnace (Dan. 3:18). Ananias went there when he went to lay hands on Paul (Acts 9:13-17). *We* go there when we undertake any venture that will stretch our personal resources. People of faith don't lack fear and anxiety; they move ahead despite their fears and anxieties. They put their hand into God's invisible hand, and go forward.

## **Utility**

Secondly we have the utility test, which requires that someone benefit from the activity. Much of ritual religion lacks utility as well as the element of risk-taking. We could be talking about fingering rosary beads or sacrificing animals. However, when you visit the widow in her affliction (James 1:27), you both benefit. You grow; she receives comfort. Maybe you didn't want to visit her because you thought you would feel uncomfortable and have nothing to say. Nevertheless, you took the risk anyway, and did something of significant value for someone.

Usually, what benefits the recipient also benefits the giver, but differently. You teach Sunday school; you and your students both benefit. You give money or time in prayer to help others, and they benefit from your kindness. You get that intangible feeling of knowing that you have stretched yourself, and thus you can move to a higher level of faith. Benefit results from the loving application of faith. The giver and the receiver both gain from the works of faith.

## **Motive for works**

Next comes the motive test. Who can say he has a pure motive of love and service and devotion when he does works of faith? None of us, of course; we all lack the perfect pureness of heart. However, we can nurture correct motive. Motivation to do good, as we have said many times in this series, comes not from a desire to earn credit with God, but from a desire to show God that we appreciate what He has already done for us. We don't do works to earn salvation, we do works because God has already given us salvation in Christ. We work because of the grace already given us (Eph. 2:9). Therefore, right motive comes from a right understanding of grace.

Here we have a clear connection between academic theology and living faith. To the extent we perceive the true character of our Father and our Lord Jesus, and likewise understand the desperately enfeebled nature we possess, we grow in our understanding of what reconciliation of these two opposites really means. Thus, as our understanding of God, Jesus, and human nature grows, our understanding of the atonement grows. With that comes our appreciation of grace, and from that springs

the heartfelt thanksgiving, gratitude, and honor through which we can offer works of faith.

The motive for works of faith develops straight from the depth of our knowledge of God's grace. Superficial belief in grace will only yield minimal works of faith, but it will leave plenty of room for legalistic ritual and vain attempts at self-justification.

## **The spirituality test**

The spirituality test comes fourth on our checklist of components of faith. By this we mean that works of faith must be congruent with the principles of the Kingdom of God. We can take risks in many ways and offer useful services to people -- and remain entirely materialistic and earth-bound in our thinking. Volunteering to coach the soccer team at work might fall into this category, even if pure motive and benefit to others all came into play. When we say others must benefit from our works, we mean spiritual benefits. How do we help ourselves and others grow in the fruit of the spirit? How do we help each other grow in the eternal values of the kingdom? To this end we focus our works on spiritual matters, not on the purely material, temporal, or ritual.

However, material needs of the needy constitute a significant portion of spiritual acts of faith. *"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'I wish you well, keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way faith by itself, if action does not accompany it, is dead"* (Jas. 2:15-17, NIV). *"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has not pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"* (I John 3:17 NIV). The material becomes spiritual when faith and love impel the giver.

Spiritual benefit doesn't mean we only teach Bible school classes. The loving kitchen service of every Martha can be just as spiritual as the lessons the audience has just heard. Also, just dealing in spiritual matters doesn't automatically qualify them as spiritual. The exhortation given with political intent has lost its spirituality.

## **Delayed reward**

The fifth test of works of faith deals with a principle stated in Hebrews 11:39, *"These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what was promised."* Resurrection, judgment, and the Kingdom of God all lie in the future. Countless others also belong on the list of those who died never having received the reward of their faith. At its psychological core, faith puts us in an entirely different realm than legalism. Legalism, a behaviorist structure, has the immediate reward of righteousness, as we explored in the article on Job (March, 2000). Faith raises us from animal-level immediate gratification to spiritual-level delayed gratification. We may never have any tangible evidence in this life of God's recognition of our faith. If we do, it's still a long, hard journey to the end of life with only the mind of faith maintaining the hope of the resurrection. We can - and should - be ready to live our whole lives devoted to the service and calling of Him who saves us by grace without any *"positive reinforcement"* along the way. You can't train an animal this way. *"Keep rolling over, you'll get your doggie treat later,"* wouldn't get many tricks out

of Rex. The natural in us wants immediate reward to know we have done right. Faith dispenses with immediate, tangible rewards entirely.

So we expect nothing immediate in return for our works of faith, knowing that we "*will be repaid at the resurrection of the just*" (Lk. 14:14), provided we don't do our works for the sake of receiving recompense, which would violate the motive of grace.

## **Personal hardship**

Pointing this out seems almost obvious, but we must include this test for the sake of completeness. A work of faith will put the doer at some personal discomfort. Whether it's emotional, financial, physical, or logistical hardship, you know you're on the right track when you don't want to do something, but you do it anyway because it's the right thing to do. "*If it feels good, do it*" might suffice as the motto for the Epicurean; the faithist looks at life oppositely.

Thus, we can take our six criteria for assessing whether or not any particular activity we do really involves faith. Many of our spiritual activities would fail to meet all, or even most, of the criteria (hymn singing, for example). However, we shouldn't confuse those activities which help build our faith with those activities which show our faith. Sometimes they're the same, sometimes not.

What we should look for is whether any of what we do as believers meets the criteria for real acts of faith. If you come up lacking in this department, read to the end of the article for a few suggestions. Let's start our item-by-item assessment by looking at our standard structures of worship and service.

## **What Requires Faith?**

Let's start with the basics. We have the domain of knowledge of the Truth, but does it really take much faith to accept Bible teaching as true? If the Truth is as reasonable as we proclaim, then the answer is no. Believing, per se, doesn't take much faith. The Truth attracts many because of its plain reasonableness. Accepting the Truth at its academic roots requires two steps. First, we accept the authority of Scripture, then we let Scripture teach us.

History, science, archaeology, and many fields of humanities all testify to the veracity of the Bible. We also have the internal evidences: structure and harmony of scripture, prophecy, the moral teachings. Given all this, accepting the Bible as the true word of God doesn't take any great act of faith. It might take some faith to thoroughly investigate scripture, but only a hardened skeptic would reject its inspiration and authority.

Once we accept the inspiration and authority of Scripture, letting the Bible teach us on its own terms leads us to what we call "*The Truth.*" Believing the Truth is a matter of simple, logical, and basic intellect, but hardly a matter of faith.

While we assert that believing per se takes little faith, we seldom come to belief in a social vacuum. The implications of believing may take great faith. Believing has cost many their very lives and many their family ties. It has cost many people their world views and belief systems. They had to start over, making drastic changes in their

thinking. That takes faith. It has cost some their jobs or careers. It should cost all of us our whole worldly ambition in life. Faith enters when we consider the social implications of believing.

### **Morality**

Morality could require faith for some, but for most of us morality should come as easily and plausibly as the facts of the Truth itself.

Having said that, however, immorality can have an enormous sensual pull to it; it can take great faith for someone hooked on a vice to quit. It can take great faith for someone to remain in a sorrowful marriage. It can take great faith for a young brother or sister to remain chaste until marriage. Given societal norms and pressures, combined with our inherent lust, to stand ground as a virgin can take a conviction of true faith.

### **Service**

With so much work to do in a lay, volunteer, non-heirarchical organization, opportunities and responsibilities for service abound. We can *see* service; it is an observable behavior. We don't see *all* service, though, and we often overemphasize the starring roles - teachers. Many other forms of service go entirely unnoticed, at least to humans, but not to God. Perhaps those acts of service which gain the least public notice most represent the true works of faith. At least they eliminate polluting our motives with the pride of human recognition.

We ask this question: Do acts of service manifest faith? We can only answer "*maybe*." Sometimes yes, sometimes not necessarily, and, alas, certainly not always. For some people, stepping up to take an ecclesial function might be a great stretch for them, a true act of faith. For others, it

could be the deceptive moment of self-exaltation and exercise of power and control. For some, not doing something might be a greater act of faith, like refusing an arranging board position when you know you don't belong there. Doing something that only God sees could represent an exercise in faith.

Service is a behavior. The attitude behind it makes it either a work of faith or a work of the flesh. We cannot make this judgment about others. We may not even be able to evaluate our own motives. Ideally, devoted service comes as an outgrowth of faith.

### **Character**

The character ethic refers to the putting on of true Christian virtue. Those who achieve this level have probably -- but not necessarily -- made considerable deposits into their faith account. Do we maintain true humility after a significant accomplishment, keep patience during a crushing trial, exhibit goodwill in the face of enmity, pursue peace when consumed by strife, and persevere in zeal when surrounded by apathy? How do we get to that level? Even to desire such outcomes displays a mind of faith. To achieve them requires diligent application of spiritual resources, often without any gain or progress for some time.

However, the full manifestation of faith requires more than developing a lovely and virtuous character. The only character trait that fully answers to the demands of faith is that process the Bible calls "*self-sacrifice*," or the sacrifice of self. The Bible has many ways of describing this, "*living sacrifice*" (Rom. 12:1), "*losing your life*" (Mt.

16:25), "*dying with Christ*" (Rom. 6:8), "*put off the old self*" (Eph. 4:22), and "*crucified with Christ*" (Gal. 2:20), to name a handful. These phrases describe a complete renunciation of will and a complete devotion to a new way of life. Utter disregard for what seems so naturally comfortable for no tangible reward at all in this life doubtless meets the conditions of faith. This means a complete trust in the Kingdom, and all for the glory of God (not self) and the benefit of others (not self).

## **What Can We Do?**

Faith without works is dead. Our lay organization of active members gives a structure in which no one need die for lack of works. We haven't a sit-in-the-pew-on-Sunday religion. We have an active relationship with an abundantly kind and merciful God. He wants to know - and wants us to know - how much we really appreciate and understand His gracious offer of forgiveness and eternal life. A developing, active faith answers the question.

What can we do that meets the criteria described above? What can we do that might in some way put us alongside the exemplars of Hebrews 11? "*By faith, Arnie attended meeting on Sunday.*" "*By faith, the CYC went bowling together.*" Something sounds a bit hollow there, doesn't it? If a review of your life comes up with nothing more substantial than perfunctory attendance at ecclesial activities, perhaps it's time to reassess your commitment. The few suggestions below should help recharge your faith.

## **Giving**

We have no legalistic rule about tithing, no set percentage or amount. If we have wealth and give abundantly, but it doesn't affect our standard of living, then that's not enough. Give enough to lower your standard of living. Only when you give enough to put a dent into your materialistic lifestyle, have you given in faith. Jesus has asked much more, you know! (Mt. 19:21).

## **Mission work**

The gospel has spread dynamically in recent years. Mission areas have opened throughout the world. We have such a need for brothers and sisters with real faith to put themselves into this life-consuming work. And, referring to the first entry, we have an equal need to fund such work.

## **Spiritual Support**

The outcasts from our ecclesial life need more support than the regulars. Sometimes shunned for their checkered lifestyles, and often difficult to reach and motivate, this segment of believers, family members of believers, ex-believers, struggling believers, and wayward believers, needs much outreach. Yet to do so can invite criticism, and involvement with some in this group can drain you emotionally. This is a formidable challenge and a true work of faith.

## **Openness and Honesty**

We usually communicate with each other at a superficial level of niceties. We probably have a small circle of brothers and sisters with whom we discuss the tough issues of life. Even smaller - often zero - is the group to whom we confess our sins and struggles and fears. This takes real faith, as it's one of the riskiest activities we can do. Opening the soul qualifies as risk-taking of the highest order. We miss such a rich part of our discipleship when we masquerade as healthy and strong brothers and sisters when inside we might have hearts full of anger, sorrow, and fear. We need to share our humanity and support each other with love and without judgment. It's risky to reveal and confide because so few of us know how to provide support. Broken confidences, judgmental condemnation, and misguided attempts to "*heal*" all await the unfortunate brother or sister who is probably already nearing the breaking point. If we knew how to support one another, we could add immensely to the quality of our pastoral work, and save many from disillusionment and pariahship. This aspect of faith requires no money, no travel, no physical danger - but it can take the most internal strength.

## **Preaching Work**

You needn't seek out a third-world country to preach. Talking to friends, classmates, coworkers, and neighbors can take more faith than preaching to strangers in a strange land. You will see foreigners for a while and then leave their country, but you live and work with locals. Do you have close friends who don't know what really moves your soul? Will you risk letting them know? If not, what is the value of their friendship?

## **Care of the Elderly**

Here's a low-recognition job with no benefits, no pay, hard hours, and often ungrateful clients: caring for the elderly. They don't have to be your own kin. If someone in your ecclesia has an elderly parent or relative in the house, they have a huge burden. Help them out. Some old folks are cranky and difficult to deal with. The caregivers themselves also need respite and support.

## **Overlook something**

This is an example of not doing something, and it can take us to the limit of our faith. We see a problem, and we wait, with patience and prayer, trusting God. We act when we need to, but we also learn to let God deal with issues we can't fix, or have no business trying to fix. We might think *we* are the only person in the world who can fix a certain problem, or the only one who can set everyone right on some issue. "*The graveyards are full of indispensable people,*" said Churchill. If we think that we have the only solution to a problem, we're deep into pride as well as lack of faith.

## **Do Something New and Different**

Every good function we have now had a beginning. Someone started the first Bible school. Someone planned the first gathering, first study weekend, first service project, first orphanage, and so on. We haven't yet exhausted all the possibilities of doing good. While we can find many venues to express our faith in our already existing structures and programs, perhaps the greatest faith comes from those creative and

visionary minds. They not only apply themselves to doing good, they also take the risks and increased investment of resources necessary to promote a new idea.

### **The Faithful Body**

To remain a faithful body, we must do the works of faith. We cannot rely on our accurate knowledge of Scripture; that doesn't take faith. We can stay moral and busy, and still not have faith. We can develop lovely characters, and still fall short. The true faith that stands opposite of legalistic righteousness encompasses our entire being.

Thus, only self-sacrifice fully answers the criteria of faith. This does not mean going without this or that in our lives. It means the slaying of self, the purposeful, deliberate, willful sacrifice of the self of the flesh. This must take faith, for it counters every desire and impulse and human thought. When flesh dies, the spiritual person grows in Christ. A body of such people is the holy temple of righteousness. Of all things law can't engender in us, self-sacrifice stands at the acme. Self-sacrifice means spiritual life. A body of spiritually alive brothers and sisters will know faith, do faith, and keep faith.

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*December 2000*