

Back to Bible Basics

Issue 11

WHAT IS LEGALISM?

Brett Rutherford

If one is looking for a good definition of legalism he would not have to look any further than the Pharisees of Jesus' day. But why do the Pharisees represent a good example of legalism in action? What aspect of their teaching and character defines them as being legalistic? The legalistic mind of the Pharisees was evident in their hypocrisy, their desire to focus on inconsequential issues, and insisting that their traditions be considered on equal footing with God's law.

Hypocrisy was the sin for which the Pharisees were most often condemned by our Lord (Matthew 23:13-36). This sect pretended to be devoted to God, but they were actually only interested in serving themselves. Jesus said of the Pharisees that "...they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers" (Matthew 23:4).

The Pharisees were also legalistic in the time they spent focusing on matters of little consequence (Matthew 23:23, 24). They insisted that these matters of little or no consequence be bound upon all believers. Any command of God is a major issue, and must be respected, but when we bind matters that are expedients then we fall into the category of being legalistic. For example, one would be legalistic if he insisted that the church carry out the Great Commission only by foot, sailboat or donkey because those are the only means of transport that Jesus

chose during his ministry. One is also being legalistic by insisting that it is sinful to have more than one cup in the Lord's Supper. Another modern example of legalism is the condemnation of Christians who eat a meal in the same place where they worship.

Many would add to this list of legalistic doctrine and practice the condemnation of the consumption of alcohol. However, is one really being legalistic by teaching that the drinking of alcohol in any amount is sin? Does the Bible really forbid a child of God from consuming alcohol, or are some brethren simply binding where the Bible does not bind?

I have heard those who say that the condemnation of alcohol is legalistic because there is no direct command in Scripture that includes the phrase "thou shall not drink alcohol." This argument is legalistic. It stems from a mindset that reasons that if there is no specific command to avoid a practice then a Christian is free to partake in it. Those who make such arguments forget that the Bible also regulates the conduct of the Christian through principles and divinely approved examples.

I put it to you that not only is the consumption of alcohol, in any amount, directly condemned in scripture, but the use of any mind altering substance violates the scriptural principles that govern Christian living. Consider the following Scriptures which highlight the evils of alcohol (Proverbs 20:1; 21:17; 23:29-35; Ephesians 5:18).

Not only are there direct commands and warnings against the use of alcohol in Scripture, but the use of this substance also violates Scriptural principles. Unfortunately, many Christians also overlook the fact that alcohol is a drug. Even the smallest amount of alcohol alters the drinker's perception of reality. Christians are to be sober-minded (II Corinthians 5:13; Titus 1:8; 2:12; I Thessalonians 5:6-8; I Peter 4:7; 5:8). They are to be in control of their mental faculties at all times. Alcohol prevents the Christian from living by this principle (Proverbs 23:33).

Many Christians have also forgotten that alcohol is a poison. When one drinks he is said to become inTOXICated. In other words, the drinker is poisoning himself. Alcohol has been proven to diminish brain capacity, harden organ tissue, and cause cancer. The

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child of God is to remember that his body is the temple of God, and it is to be treated with respect (I Corinthians 3:16, 17).

Many Christians who support the Christians right to drink alcohol hypocritically condemn the use of other mind altering drugs like marijuana. Keep in mind that hypocrisy is part of the definition of legalism.

Why would any Christian want to encourage his neighbour to take a substance that kills more people in this country than all illicit drugs combined? Is it love for our neighbour that leads us to condone the consumption of alcohol? (Habakkuk 2:15). If we truly love our neighbour, and our fellow Christian, we will encourage them to cease any practice that is harmful and addictive.

It is a shame that Christians who faithfully follow commandments, principles and divinely approved examples in Scripture are being labelled as being legalistic. These accusers have confused faithful service with legalism (Luke 17:10; Luke 6:46; I John 5:3).

VILIFICATION AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Ian McPherson

Today Christians are under extreme pressure to suppress God's word. Authorities are trying to force us not to speak against sin, or for righteousness. Smear words such as "homophobic", vilification" and "discrimination" are being used to try and stop the mouths of those who what to uphold Biblical standards. The truth is however, that it those who are trying to uphold righteousness who are the ones being vilified. Acts of parliament are even being passed to make speaking out against immoral practices such as homosexuality and adultery illegal.

Things are not really very different from the apostolic era. The world hates Christians, because their life style and conviction of truth is a threat to them. They love darkness and hate light (John 3:19). In His prayer for His disciples, just before His death Jesus said: "*I have given them thy word; and the **world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.***" **John 17:14-16**

True Christians are even vilified by denominational leaders when they advocate that there is only one church (Ephesians 4:4-5), or that baptism is for

remission of sins. (Acts 2:38) etc. This too should be no surprise, because it was the religious leaders in early times, who were the chief persecutors of both Christ and His church. Let us look at two examples of vilification and how its victims handled the situation.

PETER AND JOHN BRAVELY CONFRONTED THEIR VILIFIERS. The authorities took them aside and said, "*But that it spread no further among the people, let us straitly threaten them, that they speak henceforth to no man in this name. **And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:17-18).*** However look at their reply *But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. **For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19-20).*** What would have happened to the church if they did what authorities commanded? The church owes its existence to bold men of the past like these.

THE PARENTS OF A MAN HEALED BY JESUS WERE AFRAID OF THIE VILIFIERS. *These words spake his parents, because they **feared the Jews:** for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue (John 9:22-23).*

If we are like the parents of this blind man and do not confess our Lord, even under fear of punishment, then we stop the Lord's mouth, and give Him no opportunity to be heard. **Jesus said, Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels (Mark 8:37-38).**

Are we afraid to speak out boldly for Christ when we are vilified for our faith? To do anything less is to bring our Lord into open shame. We must not only **believe** the word of God, but also boldly and fearlessly speak the truth in love at whatever personal cost to ourselves. (Ephesians 4:14; Matthew 5:10-12, 10:32; Mark 8:34-38, Acts 5:29)

The author has been convicted by his own exhortation. Living a Christian life in a hostile world is not easy. But in order for the church to survive and our souls to be saved we must not yield to the pressures of the world. "*Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong*" (1 Corinthians 16:1).

