

Legalism is an Enemy of the Kingdom of God
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Throughout the history of Christianity, but especially since the nineteenth century Holiness Movement, legalism has been embraced as an aid to holiness. The scribes and Pharisees also used legalism as a support for holy living in the early first century A.D. Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:20 reveals his opposition to the scribes and Pharisees precisely at the point of their use of legalism. Pharisaic legalism can be understood at three different levels, all of which were, at least by way of implication, attacked by Jesus as an enemy of the Kingdom and sinful: 1) Fencing the Law rather than dealing with the heart of the issue, 2) promoting separation from culture rather than engagement of culture, and 3) trusting in self-righteousness rather than faith in God's provision. The Sermon on the Mount can be seen as the ethics of the Kingdom and is diametrically opposed to the Pharisees' form of holiness, which was formed by them at least partially owing to their misunderstanding of the Kingdom.¹ Jesus presented an alternative to the Pharisees' brand of holiness in the Sermon on the Mount where holiness is separated from legalism. Jesus expressed his opposition to legalism, and so as Christians we should follow his example. We will first examine the context of Matthew 5:20, and then discuss the three types of legalism, specifically in a Second Temple Judaism context, contrasting that legalism with the ethics of the Kingdom found in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:20 states, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." In a similar condemnatory fashion Jesus said in Matthew 23:13, "But woe to you, scribes and

¹ George Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 278-304.

Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.” In these passages it is clear that Jesus believed that a number of scribes and Pharisees had so deviated from God’s plan that they were outside the Kingdom of God.² It is important to understand the reason for their exclusion. Matthew 5:20 says the scribes and Pharisees are excluded from the Kingdom because their righteousness is not sufficient for entrance. A person must surpass or exceed (περισσεύω) the Pharisees in righteousness if he or she wants to enter the Kingdom. This is an amazing statement in light of the context. Jesus was apparently accused of seeking to eliminate the law, which brought about his response in verse 18.³ People were obviously aware of the friction between Jesus and the Pharisees, and therefore they assumed Jesus was opposed to the law since the Pharisees were the champions of the law. Jesus retaliates, first stating he did not come to abolish the law, and then attacking the scribes and Pharisees’ commitment to the law. What specific errors did he observe in the scribes and Pharisees?

A survey of the Gospels reveals three types of legalism Jesus opposed in the Pharisees. The first type of legalism Jesus confronted was the practice of adding rules to ensure righteous living rather than going to the heart issues of the commandments. The Pharisees practiced what later rabbis called “fencing the Law.” The Pharisees descended from a group of Jews who resisted conformity to the Hellenism forced on the second temple Jews. They recognized the past judgments of God on their nation were inflicted on them because of their inability to keep the law. In order to preserve their nation they came up with a strategy to make sure disobedience did not result in another exile. They

² Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 105, 344.

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 182-183.

believed that if they enforced new laws that would keep the people from even coming close to breaking the laws of Moses, they would succeed in maintaining a level of righteousness that would avoid God's wrath.⁴ They "fenced" the law with the new laws or traditions.

Mark 7:1-23 addresses one example of the Pharisaic fencing of the law. The Law of Moses required the priests to observe certain rituals of cleansing and washing in order to maintain purity in the priesthood (Exodus 30:17-21). The Pharisees developed a tradition that required everyone to ritually wash their hands before eating, which would in turn ensure the keeping of the actual law found in Deuteronomy. Another example of "fencing the law" can be seen in the Pharisees' observance of the third commandment. In order to make sure no one took the Lord's name in vain, a tradition was developed that prohibited people from even using the name of Yahweh (יהוה). Whenever they read Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures, they would substitute the word for Lord (adonai אֲדֹנָי). Protestants have perpetuated this practice by substituting LORD (all capitals) for Yahweh in the Old Testament. The problem with this practice is that God gave his name to his people so that they would use his name in a deeply personal relationship with him.

In Mark chapter 7, Jesus challenges the entire practice of fencing the law, revealing that it not only didn't work, but it actually hindered the people from keeping the law. In verse 8 he states, "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men," and in verse 13, "thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." The scribes and

⁴ According to several later Jewish documents, the Pharisees and their successors in Rabbinic Judaism believed that if Israel embraced this outward form of righteousness, redemption through the Messiah would follow. See the Pseudepigraphical *Assumption of Moses* 1:18; the Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 97b; Pirke R. Eliezer xliii (an eighth century Jewish document); Pesikta 163b (a fifth century Palestinian text).

Pharisees should have known this because of their expertise in the law. Deuteronomy 4:2 commands, “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.” The prohibition of adding to the law is just as strong as the ban on subtracting from the law and is mentioned first. The verb “to keep” (לִשְׁמֹר) is an infinitive construct with the preposition (לְ) attached, bringing the idea of “in order that” or “so that.” Moses is saying that adding to the law or subtracting from the law will bring about the same result, which is the inability to keep the law.

In Mark chapter 7 Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13 and claims Isaiah was prophesying about the scribes and Pharisees in this verse. Jesus begins the accusation by calling them hypocrites (7:6), which is important to our study because it ties it in with Matthew 23:13, which is directly connected with Christ’s teaching on the kingdom. In Mark 7:6-8 Jesus specifies how the Pharisees are hypocrites: their hearts are not in their worship and their worship is vain or meaningless (μᾶτην adverb; *senselessly, pointlessly, without result*)⁵ because it stems from additions to the requirements of worship not found in the Hebrew Bible. Fencing the law is a form of legalism Jesus specifically condemns as an enemy of the Kingdom of God. William Lane elaborates:

Jesus’ sharp rebuttal sets in radical opposition the commandment of God and the halakhic formulations of the scribal tradition. Theoretically, the oral law was a fence which safeguarded the people from infringing the Law. In actuality it represented a tampering with the Law which resulted inevitably in distortion and ossification of the living word of God. The exaggerated reverence with which the scribes and Pharisees regarded the oral law was an expression of false piety supported by human precepts devoid of authority. Jesus categorically rejects the authority of the oral law.⁶

⁵ Friberg Lexicon

⁶ William Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 248-249.

At the beginning of the first century not all Jews embraced oral tradition as equally authoritative as Scripture. Between 100 B.C. and 100 A.D. there was a debate over the importance of the oral law, the place of tradition which would include the practice of fencing the law. No one would have said tradition was irrelevant, but some saw it as equal to Scripture (at least in practice), and others saw it as taking a servant role toward Scripture. The Christian Jews, following Jesus, attributed a subordinate role to tradition, exalting Scripture to supreme authoritative status. Jesus said, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter [yodh] or stroke [serif] shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”⁷ In John 10:35 he said, “The Scripture cannot be broken.” Mark 7:1-13 records a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees over the status of tradition. When the Pharisees questioned Jesus and his disciples about not following the “tradition of the elders” because they didn’t wash their hands before eating, Jesus accused them of “setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep [their] tradition.” He quoted Isaiah 29:13 and then cited how they broke the fifth commandment by upholding their tradition of Corban. Similarly Josephus said,

How firmly we have given credit to those books of our own nation, is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it becomes natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem those books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willingly to die for them.⁸

Notice the Christians, along with Josephus, agree with the Pharisees against the Sadducees that all of the Scripture is equally inspired and authoritative, but agree with the

⁷ Matthew 5:17-18.

⁸ Josephus, *Works*, 776 (*Against Apion* 1.8)

Sadducees over the Pharisees that tradition was to play a subordinate rather than equal role to the Scriptures.⁹

Another possible group in the first century B.C. that embraced the use of tradition and oral law to a certain extent, but spoke against the Pharisees' overuse and elevation of oral law, was the Sons of Zadok who embraced what Buchanan Gray refers to as reformed Sadduceeism.¹⁰ The Sons of Zadok was a sect or party of priests responsible for the *Zadokite Fragment* also known as the *Damascus Document*. This group was not opposed to fencing the law as such, "but to its abnormal growth in the form of oral tradition."¹¹ They used the Pseudepigraphical works and traditions at times with a "quasi-canonical recognition," but never with the view of equal status with the Scriptures.¹² They specifically opposed the Pharisees, accusing them of nullifying the Scriptures by their overuse of tradition.¹³

Philo sided with the Pharisees, elevating the oral law to equal if not supreme status over the written law saying, "For the man who obeys the written laws is not justly entitled to any praise, inasmuch as he is influenced by compulsion and the fear of punishment. But he who abides by the unwritten laws is worthy of praise, as exhibiting a spontaneous and unconstrained virtue."¹⁴ Legitimate debate took place in the first century over the standing of the oral law compared to the written law, but once Christians

⁹ Josephus never elevates tradition to this status.

¹⁰ Buchanan Gray, "Fragments of a Zadokite Work Introduction" in R.H. Charles, editor, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1913), 2:790; see 2:785-797 for his complete introduction and 2:799-834 for his translation and commentary on the *Zadokite Fragment*.

¹¹ Ibid., 2:791.

¹² Ibid., 2:790-791, 818-819.

¹³ Gray states, "Taking their stand, therefore, on the written word, they charged the Pharisees with raising such a body of tradition (i.e. 'the wall' referred to in vii. 1, ix. 21, 26) round the written Law that it was made void... with speaking rebellion against the Law and leading Israel astray, viii. 1, and despising the words of the Prophets, ix. 7." Ibid., 2:793.

¹⁴ Philo, *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1993), 631 (*Special Laws* 4.28). See also 743 and 767.

were no longer seen as a sect of Judaism and the Sadducees were silenced or made obsolete after the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., it was easy for the Pharisees to dominate Jewish thought.¹⁵ Rabbinic Judaism carried on the practice of fencing the law, but Christianity should never have done so because of the command and example of Jesus.

We began the discussion of this first type of legalism looking at the Sermon on the Mount. The Pharisees' righteousness was not enough for Kingdom entrance because of their legalism. One aspect of that legalism consisted of adding to the law their traditions in order to appear righteous before God. In the rest of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reveals that rather than adding rules, one must go deeper into the law seeing the heart issues behind the law. He appears as a second Moses revealing the inner motives of the heart. Instead of trying to clean up the outward appearance by avoiding anything that even closely resembles the sins condemned in the law, Jesus addresses the heart issues that lead up to breaking the law with his kingdom principles found in the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁶ Jesus came to clean us up from the inside out.

The second type of legalism Jesus confronted was the Pharisees' promotion of separation from sinners, rather than redemptive engagement. In Matthew 11:19 Jesus says, "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." This passage is placed in the context of Jesus' discussion of the Kingdom of God and is therefore relevant to its ethical concerns (11:7-19). The term *Pharisee*

¹⁵ Gray believes the Sons of Zadok assimilated with the Christians, but it is possible that they had ties with Qumran and were destroyed with them in 70 A.D. Ibid., 2:786; *The Messianic Elite* <http://www.mystae.com/restricted/reflections/messiah/elite.html>.

¹⁶ Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 292.

probably originated from *parash* (פָּרַשׁ) which means “to separate” and may have begun as a derogatory term; “those who carefully kept themselves from any legal contamination, distinguishing themselves by their care in such matters from the common people, the *am ha'arets*, who had fewer scruples.”¹⁷ This practice went against God’s original intentions for Israel to be a “kingdom of priests” and “a blessing to all nations.”¹⁸

In Matthew 11:19 Jesus is referring to a previous incident in 9:10-13 where the Pharisees confronted his practice of associating with tax collectors and sinners. Craig Keener draws out the Kingdom implications of this practice saying, “Jesus came to *call* sinners – to invite them to God’s final banquet (Mt 22:3, 14), a foretaste of which the present table fellowship with them may have represented.”¹⁹ Matthew 9:10-13 makes it clear that Jesus is eating and drinking with the “sinners,” a reference to “the most criminal and disreputable types of people in society,”²⁰ in order to reach them. Matthew 11:19 refers to “eating” and “drinking” as references to feasting and drinking wine and beer, rather than simply eating food or drinking liquids, because Jesus is contrasted with John the Baptist who did not take part in these activities; it is highly doubtful John the Baptist permanently fasted from food and water. When seen in light of Jesus’ practice previously mentioned in 9:10-13, this passage reveals that Jesus feasted and drank alcohol with the sinners in order to reach them. This practice went against the legalism

¹⁷ J.E. Thomson, “Pharisees” (from International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003, 2006 by BibleSoft, Inc. All rights reserved.)

¹⁸ Exodus 19:6; Genesis 12:3; see also Genesis 18:18; 26:1-4; 28:10-17; Deuteronomy 4:6-8; Esther 8:17; Psalm 67; Jonah.

¹⁹ Craig Keener, *Matthew* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 190.

²⁰ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, 156.

of the scribes and Pharisees,²¹ but it was the prescribed practice of the Father (John 5:19) to advance the Kingdom of God as a foretaste of the ultimate banquet feast to come at his second coming (Isaiah 25:6-12; cf. Luke 14:7-24). From this we see that it is unethical to practice any kind of legalism that avoids associating with unbelievers, even if that avoidance is simply steering clear of feasting and drinking wine and beer with them, because that kind of evasion is in opposition to the kingdom ethics Jesus practiced and therefore hinders the experience of the Kingdom, unless one is called to a ministry similar to that of John the Baptist or one simply doesn't like feasting and/or drinking alcohol.²²

The final type of legalism practiced by at least some of the Pharisees whom Jesus confronted, is observed in the Pharisees' trust in their own self-righteousness rather than wholly leaning on God's provision for righteousness. Luke 18:9-14 records a parable by Jesus, which substantiates the claim that Jesus' gospel was identical with Paul's gospel.²³ Luke begins this pericope with an explanation for its placement here: "And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt." Those who trusted in their works for their righteous standing before God are clearly the Pharisees, as seen by the characters mentioned in the parable. Not all Pharisees were legalistic in this manner, and Jesus was probably pointing

²¹ Robert Gundry, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 213. Gundry notes the Pharisees believed that "ceremonial contamination from the publicans and sinners with whom [Jesus] eats and drinks exacerbates his gluttony and drunkenness."

²² Also if feasting or drinking has a tendency to lead a person to sin the sin of gluttony or drunkenness, he or she should abstain (i.e. alcoholics). The point is that no one should demand abstinence from others; that would be legalism.

²³ Notice this parable is immediately followed by a statement on the Kingdom of God, which Luke places here to reveal that the legalist misses the Kingdom whereas the humble tax collector and the babies made it.

out the legalism of some rather than the covenant nomism of others.²⁴ The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple reveals justification comes exclusively from God's mercy rather than one's good works, as seen in Jesus' conclusion: "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other."²⁵ Jesus uses the same terminology as Paul in referring to justification (*δικαίω*). Paul relates the tragic conclusion that most of Israel followed these vocal Pharisees: "Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone." Most of Judaism ultimately rejected God's provision of Christ; this denunciation is the worst form of legalism because of its eternal results.

We have seen that many scribes and Pharisees were guilty of legalism, consisting in three forms: fencing the law, separating from one's immediate culture, and trusting in one's own merit for justification. Jesus attacked these abuses of the law with seemingly uncharacteristic reprisal. It is interesting that whereas Jesus usually responded with gentleness and kindness toward the tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners, he showed very little tolerance for legalism. In all of these attacks we noted the connection to his teaching on the Kingdom of God. It is clear from these observations that the sin of legalism is an enemy of the Kingdom of God and therefore should be avoided by the believer at all costs.

²⁴ Richard Longnecker, "Christianity and the Piety of Pre-Destruction Hebraic Judaism," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 5 (1962), 51-63. Longnecker states that from the material we have of the pre-destruction period of Judaism, "there are more statements of an inward piety than of a mere externalism," but he goes on to reveal a number of those embracing "a purely commercial view of righteousness" where if one's good works outweighed his or her bad works, he or she would merit righteousness. *Ibid.*, 54; see also D.A. Hagner, "Pharisees" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 4:750-752.

²⁵ Ladd comments on this passage, "While men are to seek the kingdom, it is nevertheless God's gift. It is God's free act of vindication which acquits a man, not the faithfulness of his religious conduct." *The Presence of the Future*, 301.