

May A Legalist Be Saved?

God gave a code of law by Moses. A person's hope of righteousness was through keeping of that set of laws, and that was beyond human ability. Many persons have been taught and have believed, even as I was taught and believed, and also taught, that the Law of Moses was taken out of the way and replaced by another system of law given by Christ. Our salvation was supposedly dependent upon keeping this new law. This I now recognize as legalism. Believing in such a system of law, may one attain salvation?

Paul made some strong statements about works of the law. He wrote, "For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 2:20). It could not be stated more clearly than "By works of the law shall no one be justified" (Gal. 2:16). Such a concept would leave Christ out of our salvation for, "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Gal. 2:21).

That was referring to the Law of Moses, yet what was true of that law is true of any law. Law cannot save. So God did not send one legal system to replace another. The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus. God did not send another law but he sent a Person -- his son through whom we may be justified. Because law cannot save, and those under the code of law could not keep it perfectly anyway, they were always under the sentence of death. Law brings death, not life. So Paul explained, "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14). And again, he wrote that God "has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit, for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6).

So Paul does not offer hope for one who depends upon gaining justification by works of law. That would be by-passing Jesus. No one can be saved doing that.

Then are all those who believe Christ gave us a new law which they endeavor to keep without hope? We need to consider some other factors which are not always recognized. The sincere disciples of my childhood understood a dependence upon Jesus as they would sing "Jesus paid it all; all to him I owe," "What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus," "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound," "There was one who was willing to die in my stead," "Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb," and other expressions of their dependence wholly on the atonement of Jesus rather than their own meritorious works for justification. I never heard a preacher ever declare that we could earn or merit it by our keeping enough laws. They taught that one should believe the gospel, turn from sin, and be baptized into Christ in accepting His offered salvation, but never indicating that there was merit in their works of obedience.

Here we are referring to justification. But when it came to sanctification, yes, concepts of legalism began to be expressed. Teachers labored to define meticulously the commands,

laws, specifications, and limitations of a legal system to keep in doing the will of God. We would be rewarded according to the good done. The size of our mansion in heaven would be determined by the bricks we sent ahead -- laying up treasures in heaven. We sang songs like "Work for the Night Is Coming." We had little hope of entering heaven if we took no converts with us. We questioned in song, "Will there be any stars in my crown?" We heard, and still hear, statements like, "If benvolent Sister Jones (or Mother Teresa) does not make it, I won't have a chance." The preachers made it their studied aim to prod the conscience with doubts that we were not studying enough, working enough, giving enough, assembling enough, praying enough, and living cleanly enough.

These things related to sanctification, holiness, commitment, dedication, and devotion, not to justification. Yes, this sort of misunderstanding might show an immaturity of trust in Jesus, but were zealous efforts to serve with more diligence an evil to be avoided? If one served with "fear and trembling," would he be despised by the Master? If your child, with no doubts about being your child, were that anxious about pleasing you, would you reject him / her for it? Or would you lovingly reassure, comfort, and console -- yes, even reward your child -- because of the apprehensions?

These apprehensions were supported by the same proof text that assured us of salvation by grace. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is a gift of God--- not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10). Were not those who were justified by a faith which accepted God's grace also to do good works of sanctification?

"You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by law; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4). If a person depended upon keeping the Law of Moses for his justification, surely, he would be rejecting Christ and his grace. But, if you apply that as a proof text against anyone confused about efforts for greater sanctification, it would make you a "grace legalist," if you will allow me to coin an oxymoron. Teachers who are so intent on ruling out any obedient action relating to our salvation interpret grace to be like a law that rules out such works. "Grace legalists" aptly describes them!

Let us leave the judgment of such sincere persons up to their Master. How can we condemn others for immaturity and misunderstanding while expecting God to overlook our own? There are some negatives, however, relating to efforts to perform works to fulfill supposed law. It is these pitfalls and dangers of destructive attitudes and conduct that we want to warn against.

If we are justified and/or sanctified by keeping a code of law, then we must know, understand, and keep every detail of that law in order to be right with God, for James tells us that, if we keep the whole law and yet fail in one point, we are guilty of all (James 2:10). An infraction is an infraction. There are no little and big offenses. So we focus more on doctrine than on Christ, trying to define every hair-splitting detail in an effort to be doctrinally correct, to know that we are doing things right, for law shows no mercy.

We live in anxiety fearing that we are not following supposed specified instructions, examples, and inferences correctly or that we are not meeting the proper quota. Most of these apprehensions have to do with the conducting of our assemblies.

The way for a legalist to gain some feeling of security is in narrowing the spectrum down to a few prooftexted points of emphasis and making the interpretation of them into identifying marks. We refuse to call that creed-making, but that is what it is. Those who differ from those identifying beliefs and practices are looked upon with suspicion and are ultimately rejected. Were not the rejection of other brothers in Christ so offensive to God, it would be laughable to think of how many divisions have been made over details of the Lord's Supper.

Legalism is divisive. We do not have to debate that point. We have proved it amply by demonstration! Devotion to following supposed laws and patterns has been given priority over love for one another and the maintenance of the unity created by the Spirit. Yet, love rather than the Lord's Supper is the great commandment, and division is a work of the flesh instead a demonstration of spiritual discernment and maturity. Those guilty of dissension or party spirit, just as adulterers and drunkards, shall not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:16-24).

Those divisions resulting from legalistic misconceptions make each splinter group separatists, many of them thinking they are the only ones pleasing the Lord. Though they deny it vehemently, they become denominations or sects. A denomination is a separate group which claims to be a part of the whole church. A sect is a separate group which claims to be the whole church. Take your pick. Can your little group developed in the twentieth century be the entire fruit of Jesus' mission on earth? How presumptuous! Sincere, yes, but presumptuous. I am ashamed to have been in that number!

The legalistic hang-ups of the early church were not whether they sang a cappella or not, or whether they were to use one or multiple cups in the communion, but their picky points were things like circumcision, the eating of foods, and the observance of days. Whatever their points of contention in practical matters were, they were not allowed to separate into divisive groups. As long as persons were serving the Lord, those things were matters of indifference to God (1 Cor.8:8; Rom. 14). And I will state it again: There is no example in the Scriptures of God rejecting the sincere worship of anyone, regardless of the form of expression used or whether God specified it or not. So why should we reject others on grounds that God does not use?

Legalism breeds a sectarian attitude. It can cause one to be more eager to reject brothers than to accept them. That violates the most basic principles of love and unity. Please, do not have to answer to God for such an unholy attitude.

Does that mean that all who are in a denomination or sect are without hope? While allowing God to be the judge, we will say that a person may be in such a congregation without having a divisive spirit or sectarian attitude. I will venture to suppose there are

persons in most every congregation who do not “buy into” the divisive hang-ups of the congregation. God may see a humble spirit in a particular legalist just he may see a proud spirit in a particular grace-oriented person. We are judged as individuals, not as groups. No group is without flaws. No person has reached perfection, except that it may be imputed by the grace of God so that he/she is accounted as “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.” So, both the legalist and the grace-oriented will depend upon the same source of justification and righteousness.

The grace-oriented disciple enjoys a more secure sense of relationship with God, a wider fellowship with other disciples, and a joyous life where all obligations toward God and man are fulfilled by love. The legalist is enslaved by obligations of an oppressive system of law which always leaves him with doubts as to whether he is understanding and doing every thing correctly, working enough, “sacrificing” enough, and ready for the judgment. One is burdened by a spirit of slavery, the other enjoys the acceptance and freedom of sons.

(Cecil Hook, January 2002) []

P. S.: I still have copies of “Beyond the Sacred Page” by Edward Fudge to give you free for the asking.