

“Legalism”

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

August 16, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

A new section of Jesus’ sermon begins in this chapter, and it begins with a warning. Jesus is telling his disciples of a danger, indicated by the word “Beware.” People are warned when they are facing a danger which they may not fully appreciate but which can do them real harm. The flashing red lights and the arm that comes down when the train is crossing the road is a warning none of us would want to do without. Warnings are motivated by love, and we need to receive this warning as coming from the love of Jesus. He is concerned for us, not wanting us to fall into a trap that will bring great harm to us. It is not uncommon for people to hear Jesus’ warnings as threats rather than warnings. There is a big difference between a threat and a warning. If I tell you, “Give me your money or I’ll shoot you,” that is a threat. But if I tell you, “Don’t drink and drive, or you will eventually have an accident and hurt yourself or others,” that’s a warning. Threats are hostile and warnings are friendly.

Since Jesus is wiser than we are, we do well to listen to his warnings. In the passage before us today, he is warning his followers about the dangers of legalism. Legalism is when you do the right thing, the legal thing, for the wrong reason. Jesus mentions three acts of righteousness that all Jews agreed were part of righteous living: giving, praying and fasting. The legalist is faithful in doing all three of these, but he does them for the wrong reason. His motive in all three cases is to win the approval of other people. He is performing for the wrong audience. Let’s look more carefully at this error of legalism and what Jesus has to tell us about how to avoid it.

I. The Danger of Legalism

One of the reasons legalism is so dangerous is that it is something that exists inside of us. Jesus says to beware **“of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.”** He doesn’t say to beware of practicing your righteousness. There’s nothing legalistic in engaging in righteous behavior. To be scrupulous about our behavior out of a concern for holiness and righteous living is not legalistic but pleasing to God. Nor does Jesus tell us to beware of practicing our righteousness *before other people*. It would be hard to engage in righteous behavior to the point that no one would ever see it. When Daniel determined to pray three times a day while he was in Babylon, people saw it. What Jesus warns us against is a motive of the heart. **“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people *in order to be seen by them.*”**

Deep in his heart, the legalist is ravenously hungry for the approval of others. So when he gives to the needy, he hires a trumpeter to go before him to let people know of his generous gift. We don't hire trumpeters today to let people know of our gifts. But we can sometimes drop hints that let people know we have been generous. Some give with the expectation that their gifts will give them unique access to the person in charge of the organization to which they are giving, or that it will buy them some influence in that organization. This is not a gift but a payment designed to purchase something, a good feeling for the giver. When the legalist prays, the audience uppermost in his mind isn't the God to whom he is praying, but the people who are listening to him pray. He wants to be praised by them. And when he fasts, he makes sure everyone knows it. He does so by making himself look as miserable as possible.

This seeking of the approval of people is one of the most common indicators of legalism in the heart. It is when we see why that is the case that we begin to understand something of the essence of legalism. The legalist believes that all the really important things in life depend on one's performance. If you want to feel good about yourself, then perform well. And how do you know you are performing well? People approve of you if you are, and they disapprove or criticize if you're not. Legalism is just a form of trusting oneself, and therefore it is at odds with the gospel Jesus brought. Legalism says that it's all about what I *achieve*, while the gospel says it's all about what I *receive*. Legalism says it's about my performance; the gospel says it's about Jesus' performance. Legalism says "God helps those who help themselves," while the gospel says "God helps those who know they can't help themselves."

What is the worst thing you can do about a warning? Ignoring it because you don't think it applies to you opens you up to suffer the harm about which the warning was given in the first place. One of the ways we can ignore Jesus' warning about legalism is to think that it is for someone else but not us. It is important that we notice who Jesus warns here. He is not warning the hypocrites, but another group to whom he compares the hypocrites. He says, "Don't be like the hypocrites." In other words, he is warning all his followers of a danger to which none of us are immune.

Warnings commonly include a statement about the outcome of not giving heed to the warning. Don't text and drive, because only a moment's inattention could lead to a serious accident. When Jesus warns us about legalism, he does the same, telling us about the outcome of ignoring the warning. It's the same in all three examples he gives. When the legalist receives the approval of others, he has received his reward in full. In other words, there will be no reward from God. One of the most common forms of God's judgment in the Bible is simply to give people what they want, and the judgment upon legalism is an example of that. Legalists want the approval of people, and God gives it to them, and nothing more. But of course, upon getting what they want, they discover it to

be empty. It's like the football player running behind the defense for a certain touchdown when he begins celebrating and paying too much attention to the applause of the crowd before crossing the goal line. He drops the ball to celebrate, but doesn't notice that he drops it before crossing the goal line. For just a moment, he enjoys the approval of the crowd. But it is short-lived, turning to condemnation when it becomes clear that his team did not get the touchdown their fans wanted. That's what happens when the legalist plays to the wrong audience and seeks the approval of people rather than of God. He will often succeed in the effort of winning their approval, but will find it short-lived. People are fickle, able to applaud at one moment and criticize the next. God is not that way. When he approves, his favor lasts for a lifetime, the psalmist says. In fact, it lasts for an eternity.

Before moving to the next point, let's seek to apply this by pointing out some of the common expressions of legalism in our lives. I think one of the most common is that of being overly devastated when criticized. The fear of criticism is just the flip side of seeking the approval of people. I'm not talking about being stung by criticism, because it will always sting just a little, but about being paralyzed by criticism. A second common form of legalism in our day is to have such a love for our own reputation that we become unwilling to risk any kind of failure. We want to know we are perfectly and completely prepared so we don't fail and look foolish before others. For example, you never invite anyone to your house because your furniture is not such good quality. You don't want to take the risk of leadership in the church because there is too much opportunity for looking foolish if you fail. You won't pray out loud because you are afraid you might say something wrong and people will disapprove of you in their hearts. You won't go out for that sports team at school, though you love to play that sport, because you are afraid your performance won't be as stellar as you would like. All these stem from a heart of legalism of which Jesus is warning us here.

II. The Wrong Answer to Legalism

Some people respond to the dangers of legalism with the wrong answer. They reason that if legalism is doing the right thing for the wrong reason, then the answer is just not to worry anymore about doing the right thing. If people can be legalistic about such things as giving, prayer and fasting, then just don't worry about doing these things. That is not Jesus' answer. Notice that Jesus assumes that these activities will be part of the normal life of his disciples. He says "*When you give*" and "*When you pray*" and "*When you fast.*"

As a Christian, we don't have the option of saying that the answer to legalistic praying is not to pray, the answer to legalistic giving is not to give. These things, and many others like them, are part of obedience to God. He commands us to give, pray and fast. We're going to look at prayer next week.

Since fasting is the one of this trio about which there is the most uncertainty and confusion, let me say just a couple of things about that before moving to our next point.

Should Christians fast? Some have concluded from an answer Jesus once gave to the question of why his disciples didn't fast, that Christians today are no longer supposed to fast. Jesus answered that question about fasting like this. **“Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast”** (Matt. 9:15). Jesus is not saying that fasting is like animal sacrifices, permanently done away with now that he has come. Rather, during his time on earth fasting is done away with. When Jesus the bridegroom is removed by his ascension into heaven, then they will fast.

Since this is not a common part of our Christian walk today, let me make just a couple of points about it. Fasting is still appropriate for the Christian. In Scripture, it is commonly engaged in as a sign of humility and dependence on God that is often coupled with seasons of prayer. So if there is a sin which has gripped the heart significantly, prayer and fasting is an appropriate response. Of if there is a special enterprise and effort in the future, fasting and prayer is an appropriate way to ask God's blessing upon it. When Esther was preparing to appear before the king on behalf of her people, she called for Mordecai and all the Jews to fast and pray in preparation for this.

III. The Right Answer to Legalism

What would Jesus have us do as we battle legalism in our own hearts? There is a repeated word in our text that gives us the answer. The word “Father,” referring to God, occurs ten times in verses 1-18. It is usually preceded by the personal possessive pronoun “your.” Legalism occurs when we fail to live in the reality of God as our Father. It is when we are insecure in the Father's love for us that we start seeking security in what others think of us. So what we need if we are to resist the temptation to legalism is a strong foundation in the love of God.

How can you be secure in the Father's love for you? The answer is very easy to understand and very difficult to receive. You become secure in the Father's love when you are bold enough to believe that his love for you is based on Jesus and his performance, not on you and your performance. As our closing hymn says, “When from the dust of death I rise to claim my mansion in the skies, even then this shall be all my plea, Jesus hath lived, hath died, for me.” If your sense of the Father's love for you is founded even to just a small extent on your performance, then you will be insecure. The reason is simple, your performance, your obedience, is not very solid. But the performance and the obedience of Jesus is perfect in every way.

Let me say this a little differently. There are two concerns most of us have that demonstrate our lack of receiving the Father's love for us through Jesus. The two are a desire to be right and to look good. We want to be right and have great difficulty admitting when we are wrong. Most of us have great difficulty even just considering that we might be wrong, much less actually concluding that we are and admitting it. Our instinctive belief is that if we think it, it must be right. This is the source of much of our relational conflict. We also want to look good. We want to impress people and have them affirm us. I fight this with every sermon I preach, sometimes wanting your approval of my sermons more than I want God's approval. Why is it so wrong to want to be right and to look good? It is wrong because it ignores the fact that it is in Jesus alone that we look good and are right.

I like the way this is illustrated in what Jesus says about giving. He tells us not to give to be praised by others, but to give in secret. He then goes on to say, **"Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing"** (v. 3). He assumes that the right hand is going to be doing the giving, and tells us to be so secretive that even our left hand doesn't know about it. He is obviously speaking figuratively here, but what is his meaning? John Stott explains it like this.

Not only are we not to tell other people about our Christian giving; there is a sense in which we are not even to tell ourselves... So subtle is the sinfulness of the heart that it is possible to take deliberate steps to keep our giving secret from men while simultaneously dwelling on it in our own minds in a spirit of self-congratulation.

If we would know the love of the Father, we must turn our focus from ourselves and look heavenward. What ways are you seeking to be right and to look good? To receive and rest in the love of the Father will require recognizing those things, repenting of them, and being so bold as to believe that you don't need to be right and look good in yourself, because Jesus has done all that for you.

CONCLUSION:

Did you notice how often Jesus speaks of rewards in this passage? Those seeking the approval of others have all the reward they will ever receive and will not receive any reward from God. Would you rather be rewarded from God based on your performance or based on the performance of Jesus? You can't have both. You must choose. When you choose to receive the love of the Father through Jesus, it quiets your heart and your craving for approval.