



SAFE HARBOR

A Publication of Cove Fellowship Ministries
William E. Lang Jr., Director

VOLUME 15.3

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2017

The Face of Legalism

Have you ever heard someone say, “As a Christian I don’t drink, smoke, chew, dance, go to the movies?” Or may “I’m go to church whenever the doors are open, tithing etc. These are no necessarily good or bad but they represent a view that one’s Christianity must be tied to some form of acceptable action. The list could go on and on of the do’s and don’ts that are found within the Churches.

I once heard a pastor brag about how he told a neighbor that mowing the lawn on a tee shirt was sinful. For many years pastors and their wives were cautioned about wearing jewelry or even makeup made them less than a stellar example of holiness. We are told that we must follow certain procedures and rituals. Church Manuals and Disciplines are full of prohibitions. Such things as these have become the face of legalism in the Church as well as a major reason for rejecting the Gospel.

The early church had similar problems especially from those who demanded that gentile Christians become Jews and practice the demands of the Law to reflect their faith. In his response, Paul is saying that turning to Christ does not mean you lose your identity but that your identity is fulfilled.

So we are confronted by all sorts of expectations by people in the Church who chose to dictate patterns of behavior that are not consistent with the commandment, “You shall love your God and your neighbor as you love yourself”. Rather we see of spiritual snobbery that centers upon actions rather than purity of heart.

I am saying, however, that you cannot break the laws of God. It is said by the Rabbis that there are approximately 600 laws found in the Torah and the interpretation of these laws add up to over a thousand things that might be seen as nit picking. Paul in his writings to the gentiles, with the agreement of James and Peter, only places the restrictions of things polluted by idol worship, sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood. These restrictions show evidence of conversion and are within the realm of the Commandments.

This leads to three choices for the follower of Christ. One is antinomianism. The second is legalism. The third is Christian living.

The antinomian believes that there are no restrictions on lifestyle. This person is swayed by every wind of popular belief. Hence morality and ethics become relative terms that lose their meaning in a society that wishes to destroy the values of religion and Christ. Indeed often the excuse is a misrepresentation of the sayings of Jesus in order to justify their flaunting of the Law of God.

To the antinomian there are no sins. There is no accountability for actions. This is in keeping with the demonic seduction which first came in Eden when the serpent told Eve that they would become as God in their disobedience. Such a mindset is destructive of society, the family and the individual. It is the epitome of the religion of the atheist who sees no god but himself owns no moral code except one that favors the person and has no accountability whatsoever.

The antinomian denies the existence of God along with any moral code and the existence of heaven as well as hell. By ignoring the innate nature of humankind as a moral creature the antinomian is perfectly comfortable with a flawed evolutionary process which cannot explain the development of societal mores.

The legalist relies upon a system of do's and don'ts to control the expected behavior in context with that one's Christianity. Often the very teachings of the Bible are distorted in a way to bring shame upon the failures of the moral code. Hence in the striving to appear holy the legalist imposes a tinted code of conduct that masks the truth of righteous living.

It is often said that the Christian does not "drink, smoke, chew, dance, go to movies, read novels, etc." The retort is then when do you emerge from your casket to venture into the world. While this seems extreme it is too often the case especially in the most fundamentalist sects of the Church. These followers of the legal form their own cult which excludes anyone but themselves from the true Church.

This leads us to the third option which is true Christian living.

Jesus told his disciples that in Him all the Laws of Moses are fulfilled. He also said that He had come that you might have life more abundant and free. In Him was the truth and the truth is what sets free. And if we have freedom in the power of the Holy Spirit why is it that we try to either ignore the power or encase ourselves in chains. This life is not to be chained by a meaningless legalism which points to outward acts that inhibit living a life. Nor does it mean that one is free to do whatever they choose.

Paul writes to the Romans that they are to present their bodies as a living sacrifice which is holy and acceptable to God. The meaning is clear that the true Christian must surrender control of their life to the service of God. Such surrender entails losing the affinity towards the things of this world and being spiritually led by God to do that which is right and acceptable in His sight. This brings meaning to your new life in Christ.

Above all share the love of Christ with all, reproving gently in love those who are walking contrary to God's will; bolster the faith of the weaker members of the fellowship; give hope to

those feeling condemnation in their lives; show all that there is hope which may only can from God.

Reflections

Ours is a culture of lies. Every moment of the day we are confronted by untruths told to mold our thoughts so that we believe what is false and perverse. It appears that there is none that might be trusted. The preacher who touts a gospel of wealth and prosperity; the politician who says anything to stay in power; the professor who has become a political propagandist; the media which sanctimoniously specializes in half-truths; the medical professional who says one thing and then documents another to protect himself; and the list could go on and on.

We are admonished by Paul to speak the truth, no matter how painful, in love. We should strive continually to be truthful in all of our dealings, open and honest. The Psalmist writes, "Behold you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart". He also prays, "Teach me your way O Lord that I may walk in your truth, unite my heart to fear your Name". The Apocalypse warns that there is no place in heaven for liars.

Resolve then to be honest and truthful in all you say and all you do.

Words of Encouragement

For you shall go out in joy and be led in peace; the mountains and hills shall break forth in singing, and the trees of the field shall clap their hands. (Isa 55:12)