

ACCIDENTAL PHARISEE

WEEK 5: LEGALISM



The Danger of Litmus Test Christianity

Legalism is alive and well – it has just changed:

- Old school legalism:
 - Was more concerned with external factors: what to eat or drink, dancing, playing cards, dress code, hair length, beards.
- New school legalism:
 - Concerned with what you drive.
 - Concerned with a generous and simply lifestyle.
 - Costly personal sacrifice and being persecuted for your faith.
 - Missional:
 - Moving to inner city or similar to further the mission of God.
 - Cannot attend a seeker church.
 - Gospel-centered that is more concerned with theology and debates.
 - Revolutionary Christians have been hurt by the church and are aware of its many flaws.
 - Really spiritual Christians attend a house church.

“Pharisees love a litmus test. Always have. Always will.”

– Larry Osborne

Even the name Pharisee pointed to their desire to be seen as different. It literally means ‘separated one’

- In the days of Jesus, their rigid rules and extrabiblical standards gave them a quick and easy way to distinguish between the godly and ungodly, the committed and the uncommitted.
- It allowed them to know who was in and who was out.

Pharisee is out of favor so we’ve come up with new phrases to describe ourselves as more committed than the rest: radical, crazy, missional, gospel-centered, revolutionary, organic.

- These buzzwords let everyone know that our tribe is far more biblical, committed, and pleasing to the Lord than the deluded masses who fail to match up.
- No one asks if we love Jesus – that’s too generic. They want to know if we are missional, gospel-centered, spirit-led, expositional, or externally focused.
- Litmus test Christianity is never a good thing. It pits one part of the body of Christ against another.

“The gospel unites believers; legalism divides. Legalism breeds a self-righteousness that promotes prideful comparison and smug judgmentalism.”

– Mike Livingstone, *Lifeway Christian Resources*

Extra Rules and Extra Fences

Our church culture has created two types of Christians:

- The basic stripped-down model – goes to church, tries to avoid big sins, and occasionally serves as a volunteer
- The gold package with lots of bling – also go to church, also avoid big sins, but serve as leaders. Also have an extensive set of extra-credit rules and tall fences.

“The legalist isolates the law from the God who gave the law.”

– R. C. Sproul

Gold-package rules are mostly centered on spiritual disciplines:

- Also about not watching TV, having family devotions, giving to the right charities, sharing your faith, and staying up on all latest Christian topics.

Gold-package fences are designed to keep sin out but are not found in the Bible:

- God says “Don’t get drunk”, so we add “don’t drink”.
- God says “Don’t fornicate”, so we add “don’t dance”.
- God says “Don’t love money”, so we add:
 - “Don’t have any debt”
 - “Don’t have a large house”
 - “Don’t have a nice car”.
- God-package rules create pride.

“What make legalism so dangerous is that it always flows out of the best of intentions. Legalist do not see themselves as a legalist – they seem themselves as obedient.”

– Larry Osborne

An early sign of legalism is a heightened emphasis on the implications of Scripture rather than the explicit commands of scripture:

- It is hard to argue with a legalist.
- Legalism works by taking our desire to be scrupulously faithful to Scripture and turning it into subtle additions to Scripture.

Legalism destroys our freedom in Christ:

- Don’t miss the distinction between judging people and showing contempt. It is important.

The Death of Mercy

The absolute worst thing about legalism is what it does to mercy. It casts it aside, then walks away:

- It leaves people who need mercy most to fend for themselves.

- It castigates those who offer mercy as spiritual compromisers who water down the gospel.

“Legalist have always viewed the application of mercy as selling out.”

– Larry Osborne

Sabbath healings by Jesus highlighted this issue – Mark 3:1-6:

- Work on the Sabbath is a nebulous term – open to different interpretations.
- Scholars (Pharisees) took it upon themselves to help God out and define it precisely.
 - They decreed what was work and what wasn’t.
 - How far you could walk.
 - What you could carry.
 - Whom you could help.
 - What had to wait until the next day.
- Helping an animal that fell into a pit was not work. Practicing medicine was work.

Legalist offer mercy – but with limits:

- They have plenty of mercy for those overseas, mercy for those who face tough odds, mercy for those who don’t yet know Jesus.
- But there’s little mercy for struggling brothers and sisters in Christ.
- There’s not much sympathy for people who are weak and faltering. For those folks, there’s nothing but a harsh rebuke and stinging exhortations to catch up with the rest of us – ***often with a disclaimer that they’re probably not even real Christians anyway.***
- Unfortunately, the more zealous and passionate we become, the easier it is to fall into the trap of harsh legalism. We can become so focused on the so-called hard sayings of Jesus that we miss the incredible compassion and mercy he showed to the weakest and most vulnerable of his flock.
- We fear that people might take advantage of mercy and see it as permission to live in half-hearted obedience:
 - We no longer have any room for doubters, deniers, secret disciples, ladder climbers, or anyone else who doesn’t get it or can’t keep up at the front of the line.
 - We want a pure church so we shoo them away.

Discussion Questions:

1. Are you more tempted to fall into “old-school legalism” or “new-school legalism”?
2. What lessons can we take away from the “diet wars” and “Sabbath wars” between Jesus and the Pharisees? What are some present-day equivalents?
3. Accidental Pharisee often are driven by the fear that showing too much mercy will lead to compromise and half-hearted obedience. What group of people (or sins) do you have the hardest time offering mercy to?
4. Can you be a Christian and not go to church for your entire life?