



Pharisiac Legalism by Sellers S. Crain, Jr.

*All Scriptures and comments are based on the **New King James Version**, unless otherwise noted.*

Two words are often used to describe those of us who believe God's word should be obeyed. One is *Pharisee*, and the other intricately connected word is *Legalist*. It would be well worth the time to examine these two words to see if either one of them applies to people who believe God should be obeyed.

The Pharisees were a major sect among the Jews. The name means "separatist." It was believed to have started during the repatriation of Jews back to Jerusalem, after seventy years of slavery in Babylon, during the period of the second temple. The first mention of them was during the Maccabean Revolt when Jonathan, a younger brother of Judas Maccabeaus, was ruling. It was a religious- political party made up primarily of scribes and sages. They were the largest and most influential Jewish sect. Josephus, a Jewish historian, himself a Pharisee, writes that there were 6,000 of them at their highest point before the Romans army destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in A. D. 70. They claimed the Mosaic law as the foundation for their teaching. Josephus claimed they were considered to be the most expert and correct interpreters of the Old Testament. Their beliefs became the foundation of Rabbinic Judaism. Josephus also said they had the full support of the common people, and they were generally respected for their piety.

In the gospels they are primarily recognized as the chief antagonist of Jesus. They are seen as self-righteous, sanctimonious, arrogant and hypocritical. While they were sound in their professions and creeds, their practice of religion was more about the show of outward forms rather than the exercise of genuine faith. They promoted works over sacrifice and emphasized the keeping of commandments both written and oral. The problem here is with the fact that the written commandments were not only all 600 of those in the Old Testament, but also, the laws contained with the Torah. The Torah was generally understood to be the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, but it also contained the writings and interpretations of Jewish scribes and Rabbis. The oral law affirmed a body of traditional interpretations of the elders, application and expansions of the Old Testament communicated orally. When Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said," He was not referring to the law of Moses directly, but it was to these written and oral additions to God's law (**Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43**).

Jesus denounced the Pharisee's hypocrisy in the Sermon on the Mount. He emphasized their desire to be seen as pious rather than practicing true righteousness (**Matthew 5:20**). When they gave their alms in the temple, they wanted to receive "glory from men." (**Matthew 6:2**). The collection chests to receive these donations were said to have long curved necks so that when coins were dropped into them the noise would draw people's attention and would also indicate to some extent the amount of money deposited (**Luke 21:1-2**). They prayed "standing in the synagogue and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men," and they used "vain

repetitions... For they think they will be heard for their many words" (**Matthew 6:7; Luke 18:9-14**). Repetition in prayers is not wrong but praying meaningless words and phrases just to be heard is wrong. When they fasted, "they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting" (**Matthew 7:16**). Fasting is not a command given to Christians, but it is clear Jesus said His disciples would fast when He said, "When you fast," and not "if you fast." It was not these practices Jesus was condemning, but it was the hypocritical fashion in which they were being done.

Were the Pharisee wrong? Jesus made it clear that they were not wrong to emphasize the keeping of God's commandments. The problem was they were good at telling other people what they should do, but they did not practice what they preached (**Matthew 23:1-3**). In this account from Matthew, Jesus pronounced seven woes upon the scribes and Pharisees calling them "hypocrites" (**23:13-15, 23, 29**). They "shut up the kingdom of heaven against men..." not allowing "those who are entering to go in" (**v. 13**). Following their teaching and example they made their "proselytes ... twice as much a son of hell as" themselves (**v. 15**). They were "blind guides" not knowing the scriptures and leading others into a pit of spiritual ignorance (**v.16; Matthew 15:14**). While they were meticulous to do lesser matters of the law, they "neglected the weightier matters...justice, mercy and faith." Jesus said they should have observed these matters, but "without leaving the others undone" (**Matthew 23:23**). Since Pharisees were so condemned by Jesus, should we assume all of them were bad?

Were all Pharisees hypocrites? The word hypocrite in Greek and Roman times referred to an actor, or one who wore two faces. Merriam- Webster defines it as, "A person who acts in contradiction to his or her stated beliefs or feelings," and "A person who puts on a false appearance of virtue or religion." Do either of these definitions refer to all Pharisees? The answer is "No!" **Nicodemus**, the Jewish teacher and ruler who came to Jesus by night, was a Pharisee (**John 3:1-2; 7:50- 51**). Being called "a ruler of the Jews" most likely means he was a member of the Sanhedrin Council before whom he defended Jesus (**John 7:50-51**). **Joseph of Arimathea** was a wealthy and prominent member of the Sanhedrin, "who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God coming" and "a disciple of Jesus" (**Matthew 27:57; Mark 15:43, 46; Isaiah 53:9**). He is referred to as "a good man" (**Luke 23:50**). He is best remembered because he came with Nicodemus to get Jesus' body to prepare for His burial, and without his knowledge fulfilling a prophecy by burying Jesus in his own tomb (**John 19:38-41**). While there is some disagreement that he was a Pharisee, his close relationship with Nicodemus would seem to suggest strongly that he was. **Gamaliel**, who was an influential member of Sanhedrin, was also a Pharisee. He was "a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people" who spoke in defense of Peter and John (**Acts 5:33-39**). He is remembered primarily because of his best known student, **Saul of Tarsus**, who became the **Apostle Paul** (**Acts 22:3**). While a church tradition says he was baptized into Christ by Peter and John along with Nicodemus, there is no real historical support for this. Josephus only speaks of him in the Jewish context. It was some Pharisees who warned Jesus about Herod's murderous plot (**Luke 13:31**). Some of the early Christians were Pharisees though they still had problems with Gentiles becoming Christians (**Acts 15:5**). It may have been some among this group who came to be called Judaisers, Jewish Christians who believed Gentiles had to become Proselytes first in order to be Christians.

The Apostle Paul is perhaps the best example of a faithful, zealous Pharisee. Before the Sanhedrin, he proudly proclaimed himself to be "a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee" (**Acts 23:6**). In writing to the church at Philippi, he said he was, "a Hebrew of Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee" (**Philippians 3:5**). Yet, as Saul of Tarsus,

he stood by and held the coats of those who were stoning Stephen to death (**Acts 7:58; 22:20**), He "persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women" **Acts 22:4, 19**), "he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging out men and women committing them to prison" (**Acts 8:3; Galatians 1:13-14**). When the Lord appeared to him on the Damascus Road, it was while Saul was still "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord," and he was on his way to Damascus to bring Christians back to Jerusalem to be tried before the Sanhedrin (**Acts 9:1-2**). How could such a man ever be considered righteous?

Paul's abrupt transformation from being an extremely zealous persecutor of Christians to become the greatest promoter of Christianity undoubtedly helped to shape the early church. In defense of his previous actions, Paul said he was taught "at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strictness of our father's law and was zealous toward God..." (**Acts 22:3; 26:5**). Having been zealous for that law, he said, "I have lived in all good conscious towards God until this day" (**Acts 23:1; Philippians 3:6**). He was saying he was consciously doing what he was taught to do from God's word. After his conversion, the same zeal and single-minded devotion he had shown in persecuting Christians transformed him into a zealous missionary dedicated to taking the message of the gospel to the whole world of his day (**Acts 24:14**). Paul knew he had been forgiven, but it is clear his past haunted him throughout the remainder of his life (**Romans 7:24; Acts 20:19-20; 1 Timothy 1:12-16**). He suffered greatly for his conversion and for preaching the gospel, and considered himself blessed for being able to suffer (**2 Corinthians 11:22-33; 12:10; Colossians 1:24-26**). Would a man such as this sacrifice his life for a lie? Anyone who does not believe in Jesus Christ will have to explain the Apostle Paul away.

Is it appropriate to call the Pharisees legalist because they wanted people to obey God's law? NO! Jesus said they were right to do that (**Matthew 23:1**). They were guilty of "observing the literal dictates while overlooking the real intent" (**Matthew 23:23**). There is actually no word in the Old or New Testament that denotes *legalism*. Yet, there is clear evidence of the attitudes to the law described as legalistic occupying a significant part of the New Testament. Who then can be described as a legalist? Merriam-Webster defines a legalist as "one who views things from a legal standpoint." There are many descriptions of legalist, but one that comes closer to the truth is as follows:

1. Focusing on God's laws more than having a relationship with Him;
2. Keeping external observance of laws without a heart committed to God;
3. Adding human rules and traditions and treating them as divine;
4. Divorcing obedience from a relationship with God;
5. Observing the law as an end unto itself.
6. One has added, "A judgmental attitude towards" (**Matthew 7:1**).

This criticism must be carefully considered. We are not to judge others on debatable issues or matters of opinion (**Romans 14:1-12**). However, we do have the right to judge others in matters that are clearly taught in God's word (**John 5:30; 7:24; 8:15-18; 1 Corinthians 5:12**).

Legalist should never be applied to a Christian who is honestly trying to obey God. Does God's grace mean we should not care about our actions? *Millard J. Erickson* wrote,

To disregard God's revealed commandments in the name of not being called a legalist is an abuse of Christian freedom... Therefore we must seek to

guide our lives by these precepts. Such behavior is not legalism" (Christian Theology).

Keeping God's commandments is evidence of our sincere love for Him and for His Son (**John 14:15**; **1 John 5:3**).

One pervasive cultural phenomenon in American society is the predilection to be averse to law, restriction, and limitations. *Freedom gradually has come to be conceptualized as freedom from restraint.* Those who do not embrace a lax, casual and open attitude towards moral values and ethical behavior are labeled as 'intolerant and mean spirited.' Even within Christian circles stressing the need to conform strictly to the will of God in all matters of faith and practice can cause one to be labeled as a 'fundamentalist.' He is set aside as an immature and pharisaical misfit who simply has never grown to the point of grasping the true spirit of Jesus. He is 'negative' and lacks 'compassion', and yes, he is a 'legalist', ... Is legalism to be equated with too much concern for obedience?... Those of liberal persuasion have redefined 'legalism' in such a fashion shifting the meaning from the attitude of being self-righteous to the action of conscientious obedience to all of God's word. (Dave Miller, PhD, **Legalism**, Apologetics Press, 2003)

—-- Sellers S. Crain, Jr., August 2020