

Christian “Liberty” and “Legalism”

BY DAVID POSEY

A young woman, one of three daughters of one of my best friends, now deceased, made a comment on Facebook several years ago about how she was raised in a “legalistic environment by a bunch of Pharisees.” I was close to her and her family for about six years of her life, when she was a teenager. So, I asked her two questions: (1) how do you define ‘legalistic’?” and (2) “what is a ‘Pharisee’”?

That was over three years ago. About six months after, she told me she was not ignoring my question, but wanted to give it the “thought it deserves.” I’m still waiting. I suspect there’s a reason for that: *she doesn’t know the answer.*

People love to toss verbal grenades into a conversation — especially on social media, like faceless Facebook — with the expectation, I suppose, that their cronies will applaud them. They may not expect that anyone will question them. But words matter. And when terms like “legalists,” or “Pharisees” are used pejoratively against Christians, we need to challenge them to see if they even know what they mean; and we need to do it publicly.

And for good reason. The term “legalism” is not found in the New Testament at all. The word “law” (Greek, *nomos*) is there, some 224 times, and it is not always used in a negative sense. In fact, in the book of James, all 8 occurrences of the word are positive.

“Christian liberty experts” probably have no idea what to do with this, from James 2:8-12: If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

Look at how James uses “law”:

1. Love of neighbor is “the royal law”? Are you a “legalist” if you love your neighbor?
2. If you are partial to the rich, ignoring the poor man, James says you are “convicted by the law as a transgressor.” Are you a “legalist” if you show honor to the poor man?
3. We are to behave as people who are to be judged under the “law of liberty.”

There’s one for you: liberty and law in the same phrase! How can that be if “legalism” and “Christian liberty” are diametrically opposed to each other? People who claim that “Christian liberty” gives them license to flirt around the edges of sin are not, as they seem to think, showing a more sophisticated grasp of the scriptures. Instead, they are revealing an alarming ignorance of the scriptures.

The term “liberty” (or “freedom”), when used in relation to law, is used ten times in the New Testament. In four instances, it is used in reference to being set free from the Law of Moses (II Cor. 3:17; Gal. 2:4; 5:1, 13). The point to those Christians — who were being seduced into returning to a law system — is that trying to be justified by the Law can only

bring wrath because no one keeps law perfectly. So, when Paul uses “freedom” or “liberty” he is saying nothing about liberty to sin; he is saying that we will not be judged by a system of law, which will lead to death, but under grace.

But Paul hastens to add in Galatians 5:13,

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

In Romans 6:1, asks and answers a rhetorical question:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?

Those who use grace as an excuse for sin are turning grace into something cheap, though it cost God his Son. Cheap grace will prove to be very expensive for those who seek to be saved by it. Don't be deceived. Peter says, I Peter 2:16, not to use your freedom “as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.” Jude has something to say about that as well, in v. 4:

For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. It looks to me like those who call us legalists because we teach an ideal of holiness and morality are also calling James, Paul and Peter “legalists.” After all, it was Peter who said, For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. *1 Peter 4:3-4*

But let's go back to the original protest of the young lady: “I was raised in a legalistic environment by a bunch of Pharisees.” It occurred to me that she never characterized any of us by those terms at the time. She had strict grandparents who attended the church there, but that didn't stop her from doing anything she wanted to do, as far as I remember. Her parents were not as strict as we felt they should be when it came to going to dances, the kind of music they listened to, or what they watched and read. In other words, this young lady was not raised in a “legalistic” environment at all.

Meanwhile, there was a lot of preaching and teaching on the sin of the Pharisees. And no one wants to be a Pharisee, but what was the Pharisee's sin? Why did Jesus condemn many (not all) of them? It *wasn't* because they thought it was important to keep the law.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so *do and observe whatever they tell you*, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.” *Matthew 23:1-3*

The Pharisees sinned in three ways: (1) they claimed they loved the Law (Torah) but looked down on those who didn't have the Law; (2) they told people what to do, but failed to do what they were telling others to do. (3) They did what they did to be seen by others, to “look righteous.” *Matthew 23:4-5*,

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others.

There are people in churches guilty of all these sins, but you'd better know what you are talking about because calling someone a Pharisee is a slanderous charge. The people the young lady referred to in her criticism were not “Pharisees,” by any stretch of the imagination. They were honest people, trying to serve God. She knew, and *still* knows, that they were not hypocritical “Pharisees.”

What really happened? Her worldview changed. Why? Her faithful father died, and her mother was not so faithful and was very liberal in her thinking; she allowed her and her sisters to do as they pleased. The young lady moved to San Francisco and married someone who had no interest in Christ. Remember I Cor. 15:33?

Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."

Her younger sister went down same path, arguably further (if you can put a distance on sin). Her sister is now "married" to a woman.

This breaks my heart. I loved this family; their older sister is a strong, faithful Christian, so you can't blame their turn on "legalistic Phariseeism." Perhaps that makes them feel better about the path they've taken, but the facts are that it was the lack of any appreciation for the law of God, a devotion to a permissive lifestyle and surrounding themselves with like-minded worldly people that paved the way for their departure from the faith — like Paul's friend, Demas, who ...in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. *II Timothy 4:10*

Demas, I suppose, fell into the trap of thinking that God would save him even though he loved the world. John would disagree, right?

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. *I John 2:15*