Exposing Our Legalism - 1
Matthew 23:23-28
XXVII. Jesus Deals with Us

Once one embraces by faith Christ and the gospel, there are two soul-destroying detours of which Jesus and the apostles warn us. The apostles, particularly Paul, the preeminent preacher of grace, devotes whole sections of his epistles to warning of turning grace into cheap grace, what we might call easy-believism, or more technically, antinomianism.[1] This was necessary because he was church-planting primarily among Gentiles (non-Jews) in the very, very morally degraded Greco-Roman world. This is the first soul-endangering detour. It is the detour most characteristic of our post-Christian age even today. A form of it came racing through Reformed Protestantism a dozen or so years ago, wreaking havoc in the churches and ruining lives. The "grace boys" denied that good works verify saving faith, that sanctification invariably follows justification, and that the law in its third use provides norms for Christian conduct. The apostles address antinomianism with language such as:

- "Faith without works is dead" (Jas 2:17)
- "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law." (Rom 3:31)
- "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Cor 6:9-10)
- "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through

[1] See Rom 12-16; 1 Cor 5-7, etc.; Gal 5:13-6:18; Eph 3-6; Col 3:1-4:6; 1 Th 4:1-12; 2 Th 1:5-12; Ti 2:1-3:11; also James.

love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Gal 5:13-14)

Turning "freedom" from law-keeping as a requirement for salvation into "an opportunity for the flesh" is exactly the temptation that besets the doctrines of grace. Even Jesus warned those who accused Him (!) of antinomianism (just prior to providing the definitive exposition of the law in Mt 5:21-48),

> *17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all accomplished. 19 Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* (Mt 5:17-20)

Concern for the second detour is a major burden of Jesus' ministry, limited as it was, to locations within 75 miles of His hometown of Nazareth that is almost entirely in Galilee and Judea. He focused primarily on the fatal error among His fellow Jews: legalism. Antinomianism was nowhere to be found among Jesus' Jewish contemporaries. Yet legalism was rampant. This is Jesus' target in vv23-33 of Matthew 23.

If hypocrisy is the effect of a defective religion, what is the theology behind it? What is the thinking that leads a person to think that external religious acts, certain rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices, disciplines, and rule-keeping are sufficient to placate

God? It has a name: legalism. Behind hypocrisy is a legal concept of the nature of man's relationship with God. It says if I live a moral life, obey the rules, and participate in the requisite religious services, I will be approved of God.

No Christian today wants to be identified as a legalist. It is widely regarded as among the worst things one can say about a person, particularly within the circles of Reformed Protestantism. Consequently, it is important that we define what we mean, or should mean when we speak of legalism, particularly as we see it in Matthew 23. We digress to do so in the hopes of further clarification of the dangers of which Jesus warns with such vehemence.

Legalism

First, a legalist is *one* who seeks to be *justified by works*. This is the foundational error that underlies all the various forms that legalism takes. How may a person be made right in the sight of God? By deeds religious and moral, says the legalist. This is *the* issue in Jesus' battle with the Pharisees and the apostle Paul's battle with the Judaizers. This is why the apostle declares,

> *We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.* (Gal 2:16)

Six times in six ways he says the same thing: we are not "justified by works of the law," rather, "through faith in Jesus Christ." This is why he warns the Judaizers of Galatia again,

> *You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.*

(Gal 5:4; cf Rom 3:20-5:21; 10:1-4; Phil 3:9; *WCF* XI.1 "Of Justification"; and XVI.5, "Of Good Works")

We are "*not* justified by *works*." We are *not* "justified by the *law*." The problem with legalists is that they seek "to establish their own" righteousness rather than receiving the righteousness that comes from God by faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 10:3). They think that their goodness ("I'm a good person") is good enough for God, that their virtue is sufficient to secure favor from God and a place with Him in heaven. The true believer knows that this is delusional. The disciple of Jesus seeks not "a righteousness of (his) own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil 3:9).

2. *The legalist is one who imposes man-made rules,* thereby binding the conscience of others to do that which is above and beyond that which God requires in order to be saved. As we have seen, Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees because "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" (Mt 23:4). These "heavy burdens" were their extra-biblical rules. Jesus says, "For the sake of your traditions," the "traditions of the elders," a tradition that went beyond and sometimes against biblical requirement, "you have made void the word of God" (Mt 15:6).[2]
Often extra-biblical rules are created for the best of motives. They are put in place in order to prevent that which may lead to

[2] This is a major concern of the *Westminster Confession,* obvious even by the title of the chapter, "Christian Liberty *and Liberty of Conscience*" (*WCF* XX). Rome's *praeter Scripturam,* its "pious advice" which is "beside Scripture" is specifically targeted. The *Confession* identifies the doctrines and commandments of men as "anything contrary to his word, *or beside it,* in matters of faith or worship" (*WCF* XX.2).

sin. Christians have been known to speak not only of separation from sin (which is right and good) but secondary and tertiary separation, forbidding that which of itself is not sinful, which is two and three steps away from sin but may lead to sin. Yet too often these additional rules become essential marks of salvation, or at least vital marks of divine approval. "God alone is Lord of the conscience," the *Westminster Confession* declares, the implication of which is, He "hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men" (*WCF* XX.2). These the *Confession* defines as "anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship" (*WCF* XX.2).

The eighth General Synod of the Bible Presbyterian Church in 1945 passed what became known as the "Harvey Cedar Resolutions." Written primarily by Reverend Dr. Alan A. MacRae (1902-1997), PhD from University of Pennsylvania and one-time Old Testament professor at Westminster Theological Seminary and colleague of J. G. Machen, these called for personal and ecclesial separation not from sin itself (which was assured) but from those individuals who through orthodox belong to organizations which deny the full authority of Scripture. Among their concerns: alcoholic beverages.

Requiring abstention from alcohol, tobacco, cinema, and women's slacks in some Protestant circles, and requiring auricular confession, kneeling, genuflecting, and the sign of the cross in Roman Catholic circles provide two examples of imposing rules that go beyond what Scripture requires.

3. A legalist is one who concerns himself with *secondary issues at the expense of primary.* As we have seen in vv23-24, Jesus rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for tithing their spices (representing detailed, precise tithing) while neglecting "the weightier matters of the law" such as "justice, mercy, and faithfulness" (Mt 23:23). If one is scrupulously obeying secondary commandments but mistreating people, not ensuring

that they get what is due to them, not showing sympathy and kindness when they are suffering or in need, not honoring your promises and commitments to them, one is a legalist. A legalist wants a rule. If there is no rule, he feels no obligation. Justice, mercy, and faithfulness cannot be reduced to a set of rules. They are principles, attitudes, outlooks that are applied in the moment according to circumstances. One's priorities are warped if one is obsessed with precise tithing and yet neglecting justice. One is a legalist if one strains gnats and swallows a camel, if one tithes spices but fails to show mercy (Mt 23:24).

4. A legalist is one who conforms to the *letter of the law but not to the spirit.* Those who are content merely with external conformity with the commandments without heart agreement are legalists. This is part of the problem Jesus exposed in 23:16-22, the evasive use of oaths, the endless search for loopholes. Jesus speaks elsewhere of those who "honor me with their lips but their heart is far from me" (Mt 15:8, citing Isa 29:13). They were content merely with saying the right words and utilizing the right rituals. This was a constant criticism of Israel among the Old Testament prophets.[3]

Legalism in its various forms is the default position of most humanity for most of human history. Edmund S. Morgan (1916-2013), the great Yale University historian, summarizes American founding father Benjamin Franklin's religious views: salvation by morality. Though reared by devout Puritan parents, baptized as a child at the Old South Meeting House, and for a time a student at the Boston Latin School, Franklin ridiculed the Christian doctrines of conversion, of justification by faith, and of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. If people were to be

[3] See Isa 1:11; Jer 6:20; 7:4; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Joel 2:12, 13; Mic 6:6-8; Zech 7:4; Mal 1:10, 6-14; 3:3, 4; cf Pss 40:6-8; 50:7-17.

saved, Franklin believed "they had to earn their own salvation by their own righteousness."[4]

This last form of legalism is the focus of our next section. Meanwhile, we pause to affirm again, legalism should not be confused with precise conformity to the law of God. We remind ourselves of what we saw last time, that Jesus says to the spice-tithing Pharisees, "These you ought to have done (tithing mint, dill, and cumin) without neglecting the others" (Mt 23:23). They were right for tithing their spices and Jesus commends them. It was not their *careful* obedience that was at fault, but their *selective* obedience. Jesus even commands plucking out the offending eye and cutting off the offending hand in order to avoid sin (Mt 5:29-30). Concern for careful, comprehensive, and precise obedience is not legalism. We move on to the sixth and seventh denunciations.

Legally correct or internally corrupt?

The sixth and seventh denunciations continue to focus on the scribes' and Pharisees' obsessive concern for external legal correctness at the expense of concern for internal heart obedience. Should the priority be external or internal, outward or inward?

> [25] *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence."* (Matthew 23:25)

God gave to His people certain external rites, such as dietary laws and cleansing ordinances. These classified certain activities clean and unclean, though we should note that the activities have nothing to do with health or hygiene. "Unclean"

[4] Edmund S. Morgan, *Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 21.

is a reference to a ceremonial status which bars one from the temple or synagogue. By violating dietary laws, ceremonial washings, as well as moral laws, one could be rendered unclean and thereby disqualified for participation in religious services. These regulations were the forerunners of Judaism's Kosher laws today.

The purpose of these cleansing rites was to provide the people of God with external visible illustrations of what was necessary internally and spiritually. This has been understood by Christian commentators since ancient times. For example, the church father Apollinaris said in the fourth century, "The law of Moses taught through the use of symbols how to maintain purity throughout life's activities."[5] The Old Testament washings were visual aids designed, says Calvin, to "exercise His people profitably in studying *true* purity."[6] However, there was a tendency to make those rites ends in themselves (as if they constituted actual purity) rather than means to an end (leading them to true, internal, heart purity). The cleansing laws had become severed from the lessons that they were intended to teach.

The Old Testament does not appear to have required that cups and dishes be ceremonially cleansed. Rather, it was a practice which arose out of the biblical categories of clean and unclean themselves, to which Pharisees (and later Orthodox Judaism) extended the application (cf Exodus 30:17-21; Matthew 15:1ff).

"You clean the outside," Jesus says. Cleaning dishes is fine. Cleaning the outside of the cup and dish is commendable. It is good. It shows zeal and thoroughness when one extends the application of the cleansing ordinances as they did. Yet to clean the outside while neglecting to clean the inside is absurd. Jesus

[5] Cited in *ACCS*, *NT*, Ib:176; see also Origen and Hilary of Poitiers.
[6] Calvin, *Harmony*, II:100.

is using the cleaning of cups and dishes as a metaphor for life. The scribes and Pharisees were externally, ritually, ceremonially, and technically *correct.* However, inside they were *corrupt.* Their inside was "full" of wickedness. Inside there was "greed" or "robbery" (NASB),[7] as in devouring widow's houses (23:14), and "full" of "self-indulgence."[8] When Jesus says "full," He is "not complaining of an occasional lapse but of the habitual activity of these religious leaders," Morris explains.[9] They were characteristically greedy and self-indulgent.

Calvin observes that in Luke's account (Lk 11:38), where Jesus astonishes the Pharisees by neglecting to wash before dinner, He "deliberately neglected outward rites invented by men" in order to "correct the superstition of the people and especially of the scribes."[10] Jesus avoids washing on that occasion in order to engage the Pharisees in a discussion of true holiness. Think of a host who takes an unwashed cup off the shelf, wipes off the outside, and inside leaves cobwebs and spiders. This illustrates what religious folks are tempted to do. "You Pharisees cleanse," you perform the required task. You keep the rules externally, formally, superficially, technically, yet inwardly you are "full of greed and wickedness" (Lk 11:39).[11]

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[7] *Harpagē,* "a grasping at either material things or other (things) like honor or praise" (Zerwick, I, 226).
[8] *Akrasia*, intemperance, excess.
[9] Morris, *Matthew*, 584.
[10] Calvin, *Harmony*, II:100: Jesus, Calvin continues, "omits (the washing) to show that God cares nothing for the outward cleanness of the flesh but demands the spiritual righteousness of the heart."
[11] Morris, *Luke*, 222; Gooding: "Their scrupulous ritual cleansing of cups and plates from ceremonial defilement allowed them to feel they had attained to a high degree of holiness, when all the while they were doing little or nothing about the vastly more serious greed and wickedness which was filling their inner selves with real moral uncleanliness" (*Luke*, 231-32); Morris adds, "They were concerned with what one does," says Morris, "Jesus also with what one is" (*Luke*, 222).

This is the outlook of the person who expects divine approval based on the performance of religious duties. I'm in church every Sunday, he thinks to himself. I sing the hymns, repeat the prayers, recite the creed, and listen to the readings and sermon. He may even become angry when challenged. What more does God want? he may ask. I'm in church for Sunday School and the services Sunday morning and Sunday night. He may even keep a strict Sabbath, conduct family devotions, catechize his children, read his Bible, and pray two times a day. I do so much more than others, he claims. The Pharisee prays, "I thank God that I am not like other men." No, I am superior to them. I'm not bad like they are. I have a moral life. "I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get" (Lk 18:12). Look at how much I do. Surely God is pleased with me. I am a good person, he thinks to himself. His outlook is performance-based. I do the good deeds, I deserve God's endorsement, a divine slap-on-the-back. All is formally correct. However, inside, Pharisees both ancient and modern are full of "greed,"[12] "self-indulgence," and "wickedness." Inside, all manner of sinful motives may be untouched: pride, self-righteousness, envy, and covetousness. What, then, should be the priority?

> [26] *You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.* (Matthew 23:26)

"First," Jesus said, "clean the inside." The motives and outlook of the heart are always the first priority. As Jesus said to the Pharisees earlier,

> *You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.* (Mt 12:34)

[12] *Harpagē,* "a grasping at either material things or other (things) like honor or praise" (Zerwick, I, 226).

The heart gives shape to one's words and actions. "According to the indignations and affections of the heart the *foot* marketh, the *hand* and *all the bodily members* act," as Matthew Poole points out.[13] What comes out of us is rooted in what lies within us. The scribes and Pharisees were trying to reform lives from the outside in. Worse, they ignored the internal. They aimed at behavioral correctness, at external conformity, without heart change. Jesus' point is that "their method is all wrong," says Morris.[14]

Parents sometimes make this mistake. They can focus on their children's external behavior (which they should), while they ignore their internal heart attitude (which is a great mistake). Young people can become very skilled at saying the right things and projecting the expected image, while harboring rebellion and self-indulgence. Young people (and people in general) cannot be reformed from the outside in. The same problem of attempting to reform from without can be found in everything from drug and alcohol recovery programs to government aid programs. These initiatives often fail because they are unable to touch the heart. They can modify behavior (usually temporarily), but not bring about fundamental internal reorientation. Heart transformation must come first before true virtue can be established. To aim no higher than external conformity to norms is to be guilty of hypocrisy and legalism.

The error of the scribes and Pharisees, of hypocrites and legalists is to live as though God cares only about behavior and not about attitudes; as though God is tolerant of judgmentalism, lust, covetousness, hate, envy, jealousy, selfishness, avarice, bitterness, resentment, and so on. This is completely wrong, as Jesus showed in the Sermon on the Mount. One cannot avoid murder and yet hate, avoid adultery and yet lust, avoid lying

[13] Poole, *Commentary*, III:110 (emphasis added).
[14] Morris, *Matthew*, 584.

and yet deceive, love your neighbor and yet hate your enemy, and think you've fulfilled the law of God (Matthew 5:21ff). This slanders God. God cares not "just as much" but *more* about what goes on *inside* as what goes on *outside*. "O Jerusalem," cried the prophet Jeremiah, "wash *your heart* from evil, that you may be saved" (Jer 4:14).

Jesus presses the point further:

> [27] *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.* (Matthew 23:27)

Tombs were regularly whitewashed, especially at festival time, lest pilgrims inadvertently touch one and become defiled (Numbers 19:11-22). "Whitewashed," according to France, literally means "plastered" and refers to a beautiful marble and lime plaster. [15] Yet inside there were "dead people's bones" and "all uncleanness." This is a metaphor for their practice of religion and ethics. Outside they were *clean.* Inside they were *corrupt.*

> [28] *So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.* (Matthew 23:28)

The scribes and Pharisees appeared beautiful and clean. They "outwardly appear righteous to others," which was their primary concern. How did they "appear?" They were like the outside of the cup and the whitewash of the tombs. However, the outward veneer masked their inward corruption. "Fair

[15] France, *Matthew*, 329.

professors they were, but foul sinners," says John Trapp.[16] They were fakes, frauds, counterfeits. "Inwardly" they were "*full* of hypocrisy and lawlessness." This last attribution, "lawlessness," is ironic.[17] They saw themselves as meticulous in keeping the law. However, this could only be considered true of their truncated version of the law, the law understood as concerned only for external behavior, not as addressing internal attitudes. Measured by the full intent of the law, they were lawless. They failed to keep God's law because they were content with external conformity without regard for heart attitude, motive, and intent.

How does Jesus deal with us? He warns us again and again of this fatal detour called legalism. Don't settle for ceremonial or behavioral correctness. Don't try to mask a corrupt heart with external compliance. Don't put your confidence in technical conformity while inside serving God with selfish motives, ambitious intentions, and idolatrous attitudes. God cares more about *why* than *what*. He cares about what, but He cares far more about why, about the attitudes that lie behind our service, than about the external correctness of the service itself. Pharisees like Nicodemus, as strictly observant as they were, needed to be born again, born of the Spirit (John 3:1ff). Let us pray, then, for heart change. Plead for heart renewal. Seek heart rebirth and transformation, that we might serve God not as hypocrites and legalists, but with pure hearts and right motives.

[16] Trapp, *Commentary*, V:243.
[17] *Anomia*, *a* – without, *nomia* – law.