

THE GREENWOOD BULLETIN

Church of Christ
371 W. Main Street
Greenwood, IN 46142
(317)888-8288

www.churchofchristatgreenwood.org

VOLUME 6 NO. 45

January 17, 2010

"Legalist?"

By Steve Niemeier

Webster defines "legalism" 1) strict, often too strict and literal, adherence to law or to a code 2) the doctrine of salvation by good works. For many years those who adhere to the word of God and try to uphold His word have been accused of being legalist. I would be the first to agree that there are some in the religious world and even in the Lord's church who might seem to fit Webster's definition. However, we need to be careful of making that distinction that one is a legalist or Pharisaical just because they are teaching and adhering to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.

Jesus describes the Pharisees in Matthew 23:4 as ones who were binding heavy burdens hard to bear yet they would not move them with one of their fingers. He also says in verse 5 that they do their works to be seen by men. Later in verse 13 He calls them hypocrites. What is the connection between Pharisees and legalist? It seems that the connection is the binding of burdens and the part of the hypocrite also. Self-righteous or self-willed is a term that is often used today that seems to fit this description also.

Today just as Paul warned in Timothy in his time (I Timothy 4:1-4) there are self-willed members of the Lord's church who only want to have their ears itched with soothing messages that do not offend them in their lethargy. They want to serve the Lord on their terms and not the Lord's terms. As a result they scream out to those who use Scripture to speak against these actions as legalist or even Pharisees.

An example would be the instructions found in Hebrews 10:24-25. While we spend a lot of time on the teaching of not

2

forsaking the assembly because of the neglect of some to attend as they should, we must not overlook the other important duties found in these two passages. The writer instructs us to consider one another to stir up love and good works. When some try to do this to those that are spiritually weaker they are sometimes met with an attitude of "who are you and what gives you the right to try and encourage me?"

Exhort one another means to urge earnestly by advice or to give a warning to another. The one being exhorted such as one who is struggling spiritually and trying to justify their actions is more often than not replying to the one exhorting them with "who are you to try and exhort me?"

It is unfortunate but many who take this "who are you?" attitude seem to be ones who have "grown up" in the church of the Lord. They believe that the heritage or righteousness of their forefathers or foremothers grants them immunity of being held accountable for their actions. It is also sad that they constantly remind folks of their heritage and talk of righteousness when their actions of lethargy speak much louder than their words of righteousness.

Titus 2 states that older women are to teach younger women – is it legalism for older women to follow this passage or is it sin for a younger woman to refuse to be taught? Is it legalism for an eldership or a preacher to warn against forsaking the assembly or is it sin to forsake the assembly? Is it legalism for one to teach the dangers of lukewarmness found in Revelation 3:15-16 or is it sin to be lukewarm? Is it legalism for one to use the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:15-18 as a guideline of authority when dealing with a brother who has a fault with another brother or is it sin to tell others about this fault before the guideline set forth by Jesus is followed? We could go on for quite a while using examples from the Scriptures to prove the point that many who scream out about legalism or Pharisaical attitudes may themselves be involved in an attitude of "self-righteousness".

It is a sin to be self-willed and self-righteous. James 4:10 states: "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up." This is a statement that we should all let soak into our

heart and meditate on it daily.

It seems that in every society and those of every age in that particular society struggle with the thought that the word of God does not address their life or situation. Many who are younger do not believe that those who are older understand them or what they are going through. In fact this is usually the age group who screams the loudest about legalism or being like Pharisees. Many who are older do not comprehend the attitude of those that are younger and their response to issues of faith. Many of us that are older also need to heed to the Scriptures and consider the warnings of binding burdens that we do not follow ourselves. We hear statements from both groups about the other group that are concerning and can be disheartening. The Scriptures clearly teach that the wisdom of those of age is valuable. Also, we find the Scriptures teaching that younger ones are not to be looked down upon (I Timothy 4:12) but they should be an example to the believers. Those in these two groups would do well to heed the teaching of James 4:10 as they strive to work together.

As we look at the Scriptures and the instructions from them let us not make accusations of legalism against those who are just relaying God's word and trying to adhere to them by warning others of His commands. If we are being self-willed and self-righteous and binding our opinions on others then we are guilty of legalism. We are guilty of doing just what the Pharisees did. If we are doing that we need to repent immediately and stop doing it. Also, if we are trying to do our "own thing" on our own terms and striving to justify these when they contradict the word of God then we need to repent and stop doing them. If we are just trying to teach the word of God and relay His message with love then we are not legalist nor do we have a Pharisaical attitude.

Jesus quoted Isaiah as He taught the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 15 that many honored God with their lips but their heart was far from Him. Could we make application to that today by saying that there are some who strive to deceive others by their talk of righteousness but their actions speak louder than their words? It would be shocking to those who do this to know that they are "invisible" and easy to see through. This is just what Jesus

stated in Matthew 23:25-28 as He taught the scribes and Pharisees.

Are you a legalist? Am I? We all need to think about this question. Am I a hypocrite? Am I self-willed or self-righteous? Am I a hearer and talker of righteousness or am I a hearer and doer? Again, questions that we need to consider. The one who is humbling himself to God will consider these questions and make the changes needed in his life to live according to God's word.

***"If you keep My commandments,
you will abide in My love, just as
I have kept My Father's
commandments and abide in His
love."***

John 15:10