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Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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How do you Serve God?

The Old Way or the New Way

Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God. For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter. ([Ro 7:4-6](#))

From the time Adam grabbed a fig leaf and tried to cover himself and his sin before God humans have attempted to create their own ways either to appease or to please God. Even those of us who believe strongly in the doctrines of God's grace, while zealously rejecting any human contribution to our eternal salvation, are quite easily enticed into a legalistic spirit with which we think we become better Christians or draw ourselves closer to God.

Our study passage reveals two attitudes and avenues of Christian service. Paul describes them as "newness of spirit" and as "oldness of the letter."

If we read the brief description of Paul's and Barnabas' contention with legalists at Antioch ([Ac 15:1-2](#)), we might conclude that the legalists were teaching the Arminian view of salvation by works. Given the fact that these folks were members of the Jerusalem church (See [Ac 15:24](#)), it is more likely that they were teaching some form of synergistic worship, a blending of the Mosaic Law and the gospel, as the only true way of Christianity. If they were teaching that circumcision was essential to the new birth or to one's entitlement to heaven, why didn't the letter compiled and sent by the Jerusalem church indicate as much ([Ac 15:22-29](#))? I suggest the likelihood that these false teachers were guilty of attempting to serve God in "oldness of the letter," insidious legalism.

Although the Mosaic code in its entirety is quite extensive, God summarized the ethics of that code in ten life principles, Ten Commandments that were to guide the moral conduct of His people throughout the Old Testament era. Apparently over time the Jewish teachers increasingly came to believe that these simple ten laws were not sufficient to address all the many complexities of life, so they added a rather long list of additional rules, something in excess of six hundred. With the passage of still more time they became anxious over these rules and added some five hundred more rules, calling them "fences." Let me exemplify the legalistic attitude. A caring parent who raises his/her children by the legalistic spirit will continually impose more and more rules on the child. If the child questions the validity of the rules, the parent will defend them with various rationalizations, often injecting "It might lead to..." "It might lead to..." is a dead give-away to the presence of a legalistic attitude. We may have demeaned the Pharisees more than they deserve. No doubt they were sincere and caring people. In most cases the legalist is a sincere and caring person. The problem with pharisaic legalism is not that it is not sincere and caring, but that it is based on a false perception of the Law of God and of human nature.

Let's develop the distinction between a legalistic spirit and a "newness of spirit" attitude of Christian service through an examination of the question of circumcision, the problem in the fifteenth chapter of Acts. The legalists from Jerusalem sincerely believed that no one could fully please God unless they were circumcised "...after the manner of Moses." Not only must you be circumcised, you must be circumcised in a highly specific manner. What was the manner of Moses' circumcision? What does this mean? Moses was circumcised as an adult. Does this mean that circumcision of babies fails to comply

with “the manner of Moses”? Must we discover what kind of knife Moses used in his circumcision? During the life of John Gill, the highly respected English Particular Baptist, there was quite a controversy among English Christians regarding the appropriateness of hymn singing in public worship. Some folks rejected all forms of singing, others favored singing only the psalms, and others embraced the singing of contemporary hymns with sound Christian sentiment. One of Gill’s members on one occasion complained about the church becoming far too “modern” for her taste. She complained to her pastor John Gill that she wanted only to sing the psalms exactly the way Paul sang them. Gill wisely responded, “Madam if you’ll find out exactly how Paul sang them, we’ll gladly follow his example.” Of course no one seventeen centuries after Paul had any knowledge as to how Paul sang the psalms. The woman’s attitude exemplifies the legalistic spirit.

Back to our example of circumcision. It is likely that these same troublemakers who traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch also followed Paul where ever he went preaching the gospel and establishing churches, trying to sow their form of legalistic Christianity as a superior form of Christianity to Paul’s way. When Paul wrote to the Galatian churches, rebuking them for abandoning the gospel that he preached to them in favor of the legalistic gospel, which he described as another gospel “Which is not another” of the same quality as the gospel that he preached, he confronted the spirit of legalism head-on. At the close of the Galatian letter, Paul used circumcision to exemplify the new way of worshipping God.

For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love. (Ga 5:6)

Paul’s point exemplifies the spirit of worshipping God in “newness of spirit” and not in “oldness of the letter.” In diametrical contrast to the legalists who invaded Antioch Church and required legalism “after the manner of Moses,” Paul tells the Galatian Christians that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision make any difference whatever in the degree to which a person serves God. In other words circumcision is wholly irrelevant to serving God!

Paul introduced a better way for us to serve God, as well as a better way for us to know that we are serving God, faith working by love.

I am convinced that the typical legalist lives with a dreadful lack of trust. Perhaps the legalist doesn’t trust his/her own self-control unless “fenced” by endless rules. However, the greater problem of trust the legalist must face is a lack of trust in God. The legalist simply does not trust the New Testament concept of faith working by love. In the place of faith working by love the legalist will insist on faith working by rules and laws.

For Paul faith working by love does not mean faith working by empty headed sincerity apart from—or even contradictory to—the teaching of Scripture. The love with which faith works is the love of—and from—God. It is love that manifests itself in action, not in emotions and sentimentality. If you discover legalistic tendencies in your personality, you should likely read the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians at least once a week. Especially notice how Paul defined “charity,” the same kind of love that Paul intended in [Ga 5:6](#), in the fourth through the seventh verses of this chapter. Every trait of love that Paul identified in this concise and practical definition of Christian love addresses actions, personal conduct, not sentimentality and emotions. Biblical love, the underlying foundation of Biblical faith at work, manifests itself in actions, not emotions. We may say we love God and His people, but until we treat them with the traits depicted in this passage, we fail to prove our love for them. Only by specific Biblical actions toward others can we prove our Christian love. Notice the manifestation of true Biblical love.

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth

not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. (1Co 13:4-7)

With this passage in mind let's revisit the question in this chapter's title, "How do you serve God?" Do you serve Him through an ever-growing number of rules and "fences" that you build around your life to insulate you from the endless list of "It might lead to..." evils? Do you serve Him by repetitive self-energized and futile efforts to control yourself based on your private set of rules? If so, you live with the dreadful legalist within, and you live with the constant reminder of failed service!

If you energize your faith in God by conduct toward others, specific conduct framed by the kind of actions described in [1Co 13:4-7](#), you realize the joys of a spiritual union and fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ, "newness of spirit" and not "oldness of the letter."

The legalist will be self-centered and self-obsessed. He/She will constantly seek ways to reassure self that God is pleased with how he/she is living. The believer who lives according to "faith which worketh by love" has forgotten self and invests life in service, winsome and godly Christian service, to others, a life characterized by the joy of being "married to Christ Jesus."

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