

16. The Beginning of the End

– Part 3 Pride in legalism

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The outward appearance of legalism is so pious, so lofty, and so religious, but the inside stinks to our God and the people around. According to Jesus, it is a white washed tomb. The definition of legalism is “strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code.”

Legalism has no pity on people. Legalism makes my opinion your burden; makes my opinion your boundary; makes my opinion your obligation; makes my opinion as the only rules for others to follow. If you don't do what my opinion dictates, you have to be wrong and not spiritual as I am. That's the legalist's mindset.

Nothing will keep a Christian more immature than trying to keep a list of “Dos and Don'ts” for others to follow one's ways.

The spiritual conditions of our hearts are revealed not only by the actions we perform, but also by the words we speak.

Matthew 12:34 For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. When you read king Saul's words recorded in Scripture, they often reveal a heart controlled by pride, foolishness, and deceit. He would say foolish things just to impress people with his “spirituality,” when in reality he was walking far away from the Lord.

Let's learn from his wrongdoings so that we may not do the same thing and displease the Lord.

A. A FOOL RUSHES IN

1 Samuel 14:24-30 And the men of Israel were distressed that day, for Saul had placed the people under oath, saying, “Cursed is the man who eats any food until evening, before I have taken vengeance on my enemies.” So none of the people tasted food. 25 Now all the people of the land came to a forest; and there was honey on the ground. 26 And when the people had come into the woods, there was the honey, dripping; but no one put his hand to his mouth, for the people feared the oath. 27 But Jonathan had not heard his father charge the people with the oath; therefore he stretched out the end of the rod that was in his hand and dipped it in a honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his countenance brightened. 28 Then one of the people said, “Your father strictly charged the people with an oath, saying, ‘Cursed is the man who eats food this day.’ ” And the people were faint. 29 But Jonathan said, “My father has troubled the land. Look now, how my countenance has brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. 30 How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies which they found! For now would there not have been a much greater slaughter among the Philistines?”

What do you get out of this?

On the surface, this sounds so spiritual. If you are thinking, “I want God to do a great work through me, so I am going fast today.” What could be wrong with that? Nothing!

But it was wrong for Saul, because his focus was wrong. Saul showed that even in the midst of doing something spiritual like fasting, his focus was on himself, not the Lord. Saul's desire was not the glory of God. It was for his own glory. He was not the first one, nor will he be the last one, to order "religious" or "spiritual" acts for his own glory.

It was wrong because the day of the decisive battle is not the day to command the troops to fast. They needed the energy, and they needed the focus on the job at hand. The Israeli army was hot on the pursuit of the fleeing Philistines. They were all tired and hungry. The Lord provided honey on the ground for them. This must have been torture for the soldiers. But a foolish and legalistic command from Saul kept it from them. Jonathan was exactly right. King Saul had indeed troubled the land with his pseudo-spiritual command to fast.

I find the 2 sins of Saul that we must notice, so that we may not commit them in our lives:

1) False confidence

Saul had a false confidence in himself and his piety that fasting in the battlefield would bring a victory. The Lord didn't command him to give that order. If He did, Saul's soldiers would not have become weary or tired. Moses had fasted for 40 days and nights when he was on the mountain with the Lord, because the Lord sustained him.

2) Presumption

When we obey God's commands, we walk by faith. But when we obey unnatural human regulations, we only tempt the Lord with our presumption.

Ecclesiastes 5:2 Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few.

B. LEGALISM CAUSES PEOPLE TO SIN

1 Samuel 14:31-35 Now they had driven back the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon. So the people were very faint. And the people rushed on the spoil, and took sheep, oxen, and calves, and slaughtered them on the ground; and the people ate them with the blood. Then they told Saul, saying, "Look, the people are sinning against the Lord by eating with the blood!" So he said, "You have dealt treacherously; roll a large stone to me this day." And Saul said, "Disperse yourselves among the people, and say to them, 'Bring me here every man's ox and every man's sheep, slaughter them here, and eat; and do not sin against the Lord by eating with the blood.' " So every one of the people brought his ox with him that night, and slaughtered it there. Then Saul built an altar to the Lord. This was the first altar that he built to the Lord.

What is your interpretation of this?

God specifically commanded Israel that they should always properly drain the blood from an animal before they butchered it. Instead, it was to be given to God by pouring it out on the earth. Life belongs to God, not man, and this was a way to declare that.

Deuteronomy 12:23-25 Only be sure that you do not eat the blood, for the blood is the life; you may not eat the life with the meat. 24 You shall not eat it; you shall pour it on the earth like water. 25 You shall not eat it, that it may

go well with you and your children after you, when you do what is right in the sight of the Lord.

On this day of battle, because of Saul's foolish command, the people were so hungry they broke this command. Their obedience to Saul's foolish command led them to disobey God's clearly declared command. This is always the result of legalism.

We often think that legalistic rules will keep people from sin. Actually, the opposite is true. Legalistic rules lead us into sin, because they either provoke our rebellion, or they lead us into legalistic pride.

Paul said it powerfully in Colossians 2:

Colossians 2:23 These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

If Saul's legalism that made his people to sin against God is not bad enough, Saul is blaming the people for what is really his own fault. He should have never made such a foolish command, and his command provoked the people into sin. Of course, this does not excuse the sin of the people, because they are accountable for their own sin before God. Yet Saul is also accountable. Jesus referred to this principle in Matthew 18:

Matthew 18:7 Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!

One of the reasons why legalism does not die down is that it breeds through our pride. While we label others lower than us, it fans our ego which allows us to look down on others. It is no wonder why Jesus hated the legalistic attitude of the Pharisees and still hates any legalistic mentality.

C. ONE STUPIDITY DESERVES ANOTHER

1 Samuel 14:36-45 Now Saul said, "Let us go down after the Philistines by night, and plunder them until the morning light; and let us not leave a man of them." And they said, "Do whatever seems good to you." Then the priest said, "Let us draw near to God here." 37 So Saul asked counsel of God, "Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will You deliver them into the hand of Israel?" But He did not answer him that day. 38 And Saul said, "Come over here, all you chiefs of the people, and know and see what this sin was today. 39 For as the Lord lives, who saves Israel, though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die." But not a man among all the people answered him. 40 Then he said to all Israel, "You be on one side, and my son Jonathan and I will be on the other side." And the people said to Saul, "Do what seems good to you." 41 Therefore Saul said to the Lord God of Israel, "Give a perfect lot." So Saul and Jonathan were taken, but the people escaped. 42 And Saul said, "Cast lots between my son Jonathan and me." So Jonathan was taken. 43 Then Saul said to Jonathan, "Tell me what you have done." And Jonathan told him, and said, "I only tasted a little honey with the end of the rod that was in my hand. So now I must die!" 44 And Saul answered, "God do so and more also; for you shall surely die, Jonathan." 45 But the people said to Saul, "Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great deliverance in Israel? Certainly not! As the Lord lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day." So the people rescued Jonathan, and he did not die.

What kind of interpretation are you getting from this paragraph?

Saul inquired of the Lord through the priest. It is likely that the priest used the Urim and Thummim to inquire of the Lord as I previously mentioned.

Why did the Lord not answer him that day? Saul was convinced that the problem was that someone violated his commanded oath. When he said, he was self-assured that the sin was among the people instead of in himself.

Saul was so caught up in being right, that he added this foolish vow to his previous foolish commandment. Saul was willing to kill his son rather than to humbly admit that he is really at fault. Saul's humility was being overtaken by pride.

Why did God allow the lot to pick out Jonathan? Not in answer to Saul's prayers, because God did not value it. But, first, to show that He is the Dispenser of lots, and second, to expose Saul's hypocrisy. God could have changed the results, but He wanted to bring the whole thing out in the open and humiliate king Saul, whose pride had caused the problem to begin with.

The people finally stood up to Saul's foolishness. They simply would not allow Jonathan to be executed. They knew that Jonathan was working for the Lord that day, not against the Lord.

D. SAUL'S SOVEREIGNTY

1 Samuel 14:46-52 Then Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, and the Philistines went to their own place. So Saul established his sovereignty over Israel, and fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moab, against the people of Ammon, against Edom, against the kings of Zobah, and against the Philistines. Wherever he turned, he harassed them. And he gathered an army and attacked the Amalekites, and delivered Israel from the hands of those who plundered them. The sons of Saul were Jonathan, Jishui and Malchishua. And the names of his two daughters were these: the name of the firstborn Merab, and the name of the younger Michal. The name of Saul's wife was Ahinoam the daughter of Ahimaaz. And the name of the commander of his army was Abner the son of Ner, Saul's uncle. Kish was the father of Saul, and Ner the father of Abner was the son of Abiel. Now there was fierce war with the Philistines all the days of Saul. And when Saul saw any strong man or any valiant man, he took him for himself.

Saul's strength was broad over many areas, yet it was shallow, because Saul was not a man after God's own heart. His own relationship with God was more about image than faith in God. Thus his kingdom could not last. The weakness of Saul has been seen here and there, but in the next chapter it will be fully exposed.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) If what we like is nothing more than a person's preference, it is not a fact, nor God's truth. Let's respect each other's opinions and preferences. Let's not impose our own preferences to other people as guidelines and facts. If God needs our opinions, He will give them to us. God made us unique. Let's respect individuality within the body of Christ.

Legalism uses intimidation and manipulation to bring others into our conformity with prideful attitude and elitism in our hearts. It stinks to God's nostril and push away people from our Savior.

2) When our opinions turn out to be wrong, let's admit that our opinions were wrong and we were wrong.

Insisting our own ways for the sake of our pride adds nothing more than another stupidity over the former one.

3) Even though we respect individuality and the differences, that does not give us a license to ignore the Final Authority, the Absolute Truth, the Word of God.