

*"...to obey is better
than sacrifice..."*

The Battle Between LEGALISM and OBEDIENCE

The Body of Christ over these past few years has become increasingly divided over the issue of what many refer to as "legalism" concerning the laws of God and what others refer to as simple "obedience" to the commandments of God. Jesus spoke of this same dilemma many times in His encounters with the Religious

Leaders of that time. He also extensively taught His disciples on this issue. At times it may seem to us that some of the things that Jesus spoke and taught were contradictory concerning this issue. Let's see what I mean as we take the words that Jesus as found in Matthew 23:2,3 - *"The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All **therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do**; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not."* - Matthew 23:2,3

Many of us take the latter part of this scripture, "... do not ye after their works..." and the scriptures that follow to mean that Jesus was telling His disciples that they were to no longer to follow the Law. A closer look at this scripture actually tells us the opposite. Jesus tells His followers to actually, do "*whatsoever they bid you*" to do. What! Is Jesus being schizophrenic?

The key to this passage of scripture is the very first thing He says. He qualifies what He is about to say with the phrase, "*The scribes and the Pharisees **sit in Moses' seat...***" What Jesus is saying here and what His Jewish listeners would have heard and understood, was that when the leadership sat in "Moses' seat" they would be speaking directly from the written Word of God given to Moses by God. We must understand that the term "Moses' seat" referred to a literal seat made of stone that was in every synagogue at that time. The leader would sit in this seat and while in this seat they would only be allowed to speak or quote from the actual Word of God as found in the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch (Torah), as well as the scrolls of the "Prophets" and the "Writings." When Jesus used the term, "Law," He was always referring to the Pentateuch/Torah. Jesus, in these scriptures, was telling his disciples that when anyone spoke from the Law, the Pentateuch/Torah and from the Prophets and Writings that His followers were to heed what they were saying because those were words spoken directly from God.

Unfortunately, the leadership would then come off that seat and begin interpreting and adding on to the written Law and the other Jewish Scriptures. Through the years, these "interpretations" became known as the "Oral law." It was the Oral Law that Jesus referred to as the "traditions of men" - not the written Law. He called the "Oral Law" the "traditions of men" because they were interpretations of God's Word thought of and spoken by men - not God. This "Oral Law" was passed down from generation to generation. It was officially written down after Jesus' time in the 2nd century AD. It became known as the "Mishna," meaning "interpretations of the written Torah."

The Pharisees and religious leaders unfortunately, began to take the Oral Law with all its extra burdens and began to give it greater authority than the actual Laws that were spoken from the mouth of God unto Moses. The Laws that were written by the finger of God - the Ten Commandments. The Oral Law were extra "commandments" and "traditions" that the rabbis and sages began to place upon the people. It was their interpretation of what God meant in the scriptures. They felt they needed to help the people understand God's Word and "what He really meant." They began to think of themselves as "oracles of God." The term "rabbi" is defined as not only one who is a "teacher" but also "one who speaks as the authority of God" in whatever they say. Unfortunately, these well meaning rabbis and sages brought greater "spiritual" bondage upon the people that God had originally set free from bondage of Egypt.

It is important for us to understand as we listen to Jesus and study the New Testament, that there were two aspects of the Written Law found in the Pentateuch/Torah - the "Moral Law" and the "Ceremonial

Law." In simple terms, the "Moral Law" consisted of the commandments that corresponded to a person's behavior and moral character. The best example of this "Moral Law" would be the Ten Commandments. The "Ceremonial Law" referred to all the rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies found within Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In Exodus and Leviticus it goes on to tell us that these ceremonial rituals and sacrifices were to be officiated by the Aaronic Priesthood. The "Ceremonial Law" corresponded to the aspect of restoring relationship with God, either individually or as a nation (Israel) by way of these rituals and sacrifices. However, these rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices were really meant to be just a "shadow" that pointed to the time when the "Final Sacrifice" would come and bring people to the place of restoring their relationship with a Holy, Righteous God. This, I believe, is where many within the Body of Christ fail to grasp the understanding and difference between being "legalistic" and the lifestyle of "obedience."

Some definitions are in order.

What is Legalism?

- "Legalism" is based on the concept of trying to become "holy" through the practice and performance of certain rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices rather than the saving blood of the Messiah, Jesus - the once and for all, Final Sacrifice.
- The legalist's attitude of heart is more concerned with rituals, ceremonies and performance. This ultimately leads to the attitude of self-exaltation, self-righteousness, and being self-congratulatory of the completion of the ritual, ceremony or sacrifice - even if it did not set you back into true relationship with God. The most important thing was the successful completion of the ritual.
- The problem in this is that the person is actually trying to get into relationship with a Holy God based on his or her own performance and deeds which can never happen. Unfortunately, they become blinded to this fact and they begin to place greater emphasis on the ritual and ceremony than that of God, Himself. In other words, the rituals and ceremony become the person's god. Jesus refers to this as, and warns His disciples to, "...beware of the leaven of the Pharisees." Luke 12:2
- For the Religious Leaders that Jesus encountered it was the attitude of their heart that tried to earn or gain the favor of God and enter into relationship with a Holy God through the outward rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices of the "Ceremonial Law" as found in the Pentateuch/Torah. It was also based on using the interpretations of the rabbis and sages of the "Ceremonial Law" as passed down through the "Oral Law." They came to believe that through the successful completion of these rituals they would be looked upon as "righteous" by God and that it also made them look and appear to those around them as if they were truly righteous - which they were not, as Jesus clearly told them.
- The truth of the matter was that the rituals, the sacrificial system and ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law were never meant to be a way to bring anyone into a right relationship with God - they never could. They were only a "shadow" of the real sacrifice - Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God. The Aaronic Priesthood was meant to only be a shadow of the true High Priest - Jesus. It is Jesus who is the High Priest of our salvation. It is Jesus who is the Priest after the order of Melchizedek, who was the Priest of the Most High God. It would only be the final sacrifice of the spotless Lamb of God (Jesus) that was offered up by the true High Priest of the Most High God (Jesus), that would ultimately be accepted by Yahweh Adonai. This is explained perfectly by the author of the Book of Hebrews. The author wrote to Jewish believers who were being drawn into going back into the ceremonial aspects of the Law by other Jewish people of the first century.
 - We read in Hebrews 10:1-12 (KJV) - *For the law (the "Ceremonial" aspect of the Law) **having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect.** 2 For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. 3 But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. 4 **For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.** 5*

Wherefore when he (Jesus) cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me: 6 **In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure.** 7 Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God. 8 Above when he said, Sacrifice and offering and burnt offerings and offering for sin thou wouldest not, neither hadst pleasure therein; which are offered by the law (the "Ceremonial" aspect of the Law); 9 Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second. 10 By the which will **we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.** 11 And every priest (the Aaronic Priesthood) standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices (the scarifices of the "ceremonial" aspect of the Law), which can never take away sins: 12 **But this man** (Jesus, the High Priest of the order of Melchisedek), **after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God;** - Unitalicized Parenthesis added by this author.

Before we go further, I would like to point out that this is not just a Jewish problem. Today, this has become a problem within the Christian world and spheres. The emphasis of "Christian legalism" has become very similar to that of the Pharisees and the other Religious Leaders of Jesus' day. "Christian legalism" occurs when a person tries to look like and tries to give the appearance of being holy and in right standing with God through an outward appearance while their inward heart condition is still very far from God. We may not be doing the rituals of the "Ceremonial Law," but we in the Church have made our own rituals. The successful "performance" of these rituals such as music, song, preaching and even the number of times we attend church services or events, has become more important to us than the God, we say, we are using these things to worship. The bottom line is that, sometimes, these become just "performance oriented rituals." Yes, sometimes even within our churches. Instead of relationship with God, there is still only separation from a Holy God. Stephen J Cole, from www.bible.org, I believe, gives a good explanation of what today, in many Christian circles, has evolved into what I referred to as "Christian legalism."

"Legalism is an attempt to gain favor with God or to impress our fellow man by doing certain things (or avoiding other things), **without regard to the condition of our hearts before God.** At the root of legalism is the **sin of pride**, because the legalist thinks that he is able to commend himself to God by his own good deeds. Invariably, he is only looking at externals, not at his heart. Also, the legalist's pride motivates him to exalt himself in the sight of others by his outward behavior, again neglecting to see the corruption of his own heart. Thus legalism denies human depravity and exalts human ability."

What is Obedience

- The root aspect of obedience begins with a correct understanding and attitude of heart concerning how a person can truly enter into a true relationship with God. True relationship with God only comes through and because of, the Blood of Jesus and what that did for the individual - it saved the individual from eternal separation from a Holy God. Through the Blood of Jesus a person can now be "set at one again with God" and be restored back into a relationship with God. It was accomplished through nothing that anyone did or can do other than to believe in and accept the sacrifice that was accomplished on our behalf by Jesus.
- Jesus' own definition of eternal life is found in John 17:3 - **"And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."** This relationship, this "oneness" that Jesus speaks of can only be accomplished through the final perfect sacrifice that was truly acceptable to God and fulfilled at the cross of Calvary. It could never, nor was it ever meant to be, accomplished by or through anything found in the "Ceremonial" aspect of the Law or anything a person can do on their own.
- If we grasp that truth then we can get a clearer understanding of what Jesus declares in Matthew 5:17-20 (KJV) - **"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass**

from the law, till all be fulfilled. **Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments** (the Moral Law), **and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.** For I say unto you, **That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.**" (The Pharisaical concept of "righteousness" was to gain holiness and acceptance through the rituals and sacrifices of the ceremonial law which was never truly possible - Refer to Hebrews 10:1-12)

- This is what the Apostle Paul meant in Galatians 3: 23-26 - "*But before faith came, we were kept under the law* (Ceremonial Law), *shut up unto the faith* (unable to truly enter into relationship with God) *which should afterwards be revealed.* 24 *Wherefore the law* (Ceremonial Law) *was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ* (was a "shadow" which pointed us to Christ as the final sacrifice), *that we might be justified by faith.* (Believing that Jesus was the Final Sacrifice which fulfilled every aspect of the Ceremonial Law) 25 *But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster* (the Ceremonial Law). 26 *For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.* (Faith in the final sacrifice on the cross by Jesus and then by believing in and having faith that He did indeed rise from the grave.) - Parenthesis added by this author
 - Therefore, Jesus fulfilled **every** aspect of the sacrificial, ceremonial law on my behalf. I am no longer under the "law of ceremony and ritual" to try to get into right standing with God.
 - Jesus also fulfilled **every** aspect of the Moral Law. He lived His lifestyle by walking in and expressing through His character and personality, every aspect of every one of the Ten Commandments. He did this to be an example for mankind of how a person who is in true relationship with their God was to live their life - in "moral excellence." He did this by following and obeying the precepts and commandments spoken by and given by God, Himself. The scriptures through the Apostle Paul tell us that we would not know what would be right (pleasing to God) or wrong (sin and what is displeasing to the heart of God) had it not been for the Law (the Moral Law) spoken and given by God.

Throughout His life on this earth Jesus walked in and lived out every aspect of the "moral law" (i.e. - the Ten Commandments) giving us, as His disciples, an example of what living a Godly lifestyle was to look like. He role-modeled this by walking in obedience to every aspect of the moral law. Jesus' lifestyle was one that walked in and lived out the "Moral" aspect of the Law and He did it with moral excellence.

Now as a disciple of Jesus and as a "son of God," I am to live my life within the context of the "Moral Law" (i.e. - the Ten Commandments, etc) just as Jesus lived in this Godly, moral lifestyle. Jesus walked in obedience to both the "moral law" and the "ceremonial law." He totally "fulfilled" the sacrificial, "ceremonial law" for all mankind through His final sacrifice on the cross. That was "finished" and fulfilled on the cross. There is no more need for rituals, ceremony or sacrifices (Jewish ritualism or Christian ritualism) to try to successfully perform to restore and enter into a greater relationship with God. It was accomplished only by and through the blood of Jesus.

As a disciple of Jesus, I willfully and joyfully choose to follow and obey the moral commandments of God, not because I have to under bondage and dread. Instead, I choose to obey and live a lifestyle of these moral and behavioral aspects of the Law because I love Him and I desire to simply bless the heart of my King. I love Him because He first loved me (1John 4:10). I desire to live my life with moral excellence as an act of worship unto my God. That is why Jesus tells us in John 14:15 - "*If you love me you will keep my commandments.*" (The moral, behavioral commandments) As born again children of God, the Father has given us His Holy Spirit to lead, guide, and help us live out this lifestyle of "moral excellence."

A heart that is "legalistic" pretends to honor God's holiness. However, it is only through a true relationship with God can a person be set free and experience the beauty of God's holiness and pure love.

When we experience a restored relationship back to a holy, loving heavenly Father what else can I do? What else would I want to do but worship Him? Not just with music and song but with my lifestyle - a lifestyle of moral excellence just as Jesus did when He walked this earth. As 1John 5:3 states, *"This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome."* **When we obey out of a heart of love for God, even though it is not always easy, it will always result in great joy and blessing.** Obedience to God in living a lifestyle of moral excellence is, I believe, the highest form and action of a true worshipper of the Living God. (John 4:24)

Some prophetic scriptures that refer to living in the moral aspects and commandments of the Law

- Psalm 51:16, 17 - *"For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. **The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise...***
- 1Samuel 15:22 - *" And Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in **obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.**"*
- James 1:22 exhorts us, *"But **be ye doers of the word** (the moral aspects of the Law), and not hearers only, deceiving (betraying) your own selves."*

Legalism and Obedience are both attitudes of the heart. However, they are on opposite ends of the spectrum. Legalism is the incorrect attitude of heart that believes that the outward appearance of holiness without a heart that truly loves nor understands who God really is, is their way of forcibly obtaining, by their own abilities, a right standing with God. Obedience on the other hand is the correct attitude of heart that desires to obey out of a pure love and passion unto God. I obey because my heart understands what was accomplished for me at the cross and by the resurrection of Jesus two thousand years ago.

Through faith in Jesus fulfilling that aspect of the Ceremonial Law for me I now have been "set at one again" with God. I now have eternal life, which is a restored relationship of being in oneness with my God. I am now *"one with the Father and with His son Jesus Christ,"* which is the definition of eternal life. I am free from eternal damnation, which is separation from God. It is a heart that says, "I obey simply because I am His disciple and I desire to live the lifestyle that Jesus role-modeled. I am one who chooses to change my lifestyle (my moral behavior as written to us by the "finger of God") to the One I choose to follow, Jesus, because it simply blesses the heart of my God. What I may receive because of my obedience is of a secondary nature."

Jesus, himself said the following concerning the importance and value of obeying and doing the two commandments which sum up the Ten Commandments of the moral law - Luke 10:26-28 - *"And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? 26 He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? 27 And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. 28 And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: **this do, and thou shalt live.**"*