

GOD—LEGAL OR LEGALISTIC?

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Here are some examples of silly laws:

Idaho state law makes it illegal for a man to give his sweetheart a box of candy weighing less than fifty pounds.

In Devon, Connecticut, it is unlawful to walk backwards after sunset.

In Greene, New York, it is illegal to eat peanuts and walk backwards on the sidewalks when a concert is on.

In Lexington, Kentucky, it's illegal to carry an ice cream cone in your pocket.

In Memphis, Tennessee, it is illegal for a woman to drive a car unless there is a man either running or walking in front of it waving a red flag to warn approaching motorists and pedestrians.

In Pocatello, Idaho, a law passed in 1912 provided that "The carrying of concealed weapons is forbidden, unless same are exhibited to public view."

In Seattle, Washington, it is illegal to carry a concealed weapon that is over six feet in length.

In Tennessee, it is illegal to shoot any game other than whales from a moving automobile.

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, it is against the law to open a soda bottle without the supervision of a licensed engineer.

It is illegal to drive more than two thousand sheep down Hollywood Boulevard at one time.

It is Texas law that when two trains meet each other at a railroad crossing, each shall come to a full stop, and neither shall proceed until the other has gone.

It's illegal in Wilbur, Washington, to ride an ugly horse.

Kansas state law requires pedestrians crossing the highways at night to wear tail lights.

Kirkland, Illinois, law forbids bees to fly over the village or through any of its streets.

Minors in Kansas City, Missouri, are not allowed to purchase cap pistols; they may buy shotguns freely, however.

The Arkansas legislature passed a law that states that the Arkansas River can rise no higher than to the Main Street bridge in Little Rock.

The state law of Pennsylvania prohibits singing in the bathtub.

Now for some more local examples:

Horses are forbidden to eat fire hydrants in Marshalltown, Iowa.

In Corning, Iowa, it is illegal to speak to anyone passing along the street or sidewalk.

In Ottumwa, Iowa, "It is unlawful for any male person, within the corporate limits of the (city), to wink at any female person with whom he is unacquainted."

Warn your hubby that after love making in Ames, Iowa, he isn't allowed to take more than three gulps of beer while lying in bed with you- or holding you in his arms.

We can laugh at those, but what if any of those laws were pointed at us, and we would get in trouble for all the times we have broken them? That's how people outside of the church see us. To them church is a place where "Thou shalt not" is the main message. The employees at a coffeehouse in Dallas complain about Christians because they are so rude coming in crowds to the place after church on Sundays. A hairdresser saw the church as a place that turned her friend into a legalist who criticized everything about the hairdresser. "Do not," "Do not," and "Do not!" is what they think in their minds when they hear the word "church."

Look at the Ten Commandments. Except for "remember the Sabbath to keep it holy," and "Honor your father and mother," they are all negative—"Don't have any other gods." "Don't use God's name in vain." "Don't kill." "Don't commit adultery." "Don't steal." "Don't bear false witness." "Don't covet." God makes it very clear that these rules must be obeyed. "Follow them so that you may live and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you." So isn't God being legalistic?

A man thinks he's better than his neighbor because he weeds his lawn. A missionary feels he is a better person than someone who works at a business back in his home country. That's legalism. But if I feel that I am better because I am more flexible with the rules than someone else or because I am more tolerant, then that's legalism. Legalism is not about following or not following the laws. It is about establishing and enforcing the laws on "me" and what works best or fits best for "me."

We might think of God as a stern judge in heaven enacting harsh laws on the people of Israel. But we need to see these laws in the context of the people God gave them to. In the ancient world you had rules—lots of them. They were enforced by family, society, government. Tribal chiefs were seen as moral leaders. Religion, however, involved what could not be explained, what was disordered and fickle, like the rain and disease and fertility. The gods were fickle, amoral, who did what they wanted to do. That is why there was feast, then famine; flood,

then drought; health, then plague. The gods did things according to no rules' they just did what they wanted to do like spoiled children.

But in the Old Testament we see a God who deals with His people according to rules and commands. That's why God says in Deuteronomy:

What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them as the LORD, your God, is near you whenever you pray to Him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

With a pagan god who had no scruples the only way to deal with that god was with deceit and manipulation, flattery, bribery, sacrifice—to do whatever it took to get what you want from him. But with God you had to trust that God would bless and give you, not because you got it out of Him, but because He is a God who loves. As adults we realize that most loving parents are the one who set definite boundaries for their children and live according to them. This is more loving than parents who just their kids do what they want. They do that not to be better than us, which is legalism, but to love us.

We see that even more as we look into the laws God has for Israel. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” sounds so brutal to us. But the context was that in ancient cultures you got more than even—two eyes for an eye or all teeth for a tooth. God was not encouraging revenge, but stopping excessive punishment. It is the principle we still practice when we say, “The punishment should fit the crime.”

Jesus tells us that is not what goes into a person that corrupts him, but how it comes out. Laws aren't the problem, but what we do with them. If we enforce or ignore those rules to place ourselves in an advantage over others, that is legalism. But if we use those laws as blessings to protect from evil, to show how to help others, and keep order, they can be a great blessing.

The man in the picture is Heinrich Christian Schwan. You have probably never heard of him. He lived over 150 years ago. He was a Lutheran pastor. For those of you who used a catechism in confirmation instruction, he is the one who wrote the original list of questions and answers that is still the basis for most of the books today. Luther's catechism is just the beginning of the book. Most of the rest is based on Schwan. In confirmation classes years ago you had to memorize the answers to all those questions with Bible verses to back them up. They had a special Sunday called “examination Sunday” the week before confirmation where you were quizzed by the pastor before the whole congregation. It certainly sounds all legalistic. But Schwan wrote this:

1. Evangelical practice consists not in this, that we teach and treat nothing except the evangelical message (the Gospel), but in this, that we treat everything in evangelical fashion.

2. This means that since we expect justification before God, the renewal of the heart, and the fruits of the Spirit only through the Gospel, we have this one thing in mind in everything that we do, to give free course and sway to the Gospel.
3. For this very reason, when we follow evangelical practice, we do not discard the Law or make its edges dull through bringing in the Gospel, but we rather preach it with all the more seriousness in its full severity, however, in evangelical fashion.
4. The Law is used in an evangelical way if it is employed solely for the purpose of preparing the soil for the evangelical message (the Gospel) and of submitting a divine norm for the manifestations of the new life that spontaneously arises through the evangelical message.
5. It is not evangelical practice to cast the pearls before the swine, but much less is it evangelical practice to keep them in one's own pocket.
6. Evangelical practice drops not one iota of the things that God demands, but it demands nothing else and no more than faith and love.
7. Evangelical practice demands manifestation of faith and love if we desire to be saved, but it does not issue commands about their various manifestations as far as aim, amount, and mode are concerned.
8. Evangelical practice demands fulfillment of even the smallest letter of the Law, but it does not make the state of grace dependent on the keeping of the Law.

The Church is to be evangelical. That doesn't mean strict or old-fashioned or stubborn. It means "of the Gospel." The purpose of the Church is to serve the Gospel of Christ Jesus. The Gospel is just the opposite of legalism. The Gospel is not setting things to my advantage, but putting full trust in Jesus to save us. And when we do that, God's rules are not about limiting us, "Don't do this," or "Don't do that," but about how we can be guided in sharing His Gospel to others.

"What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" What other people have a God who relates to them in love and trust, not power and manipulation? The nation of Israel, despite the fact that they so often disobeyed God's laws, became a light to other people to show them the true God. The God of order and relationships attracted many people to the Old Testament. By the time of Jesus, when the Gospel was spread to them, they helped the Church grow rapidly. God can use us, too, to show His love. It is what happens not as we ignore or make light of His laws, but when we live in His forgiveness, in the Gospel, not in legalism. When we act in humility, in service, in honesty, ethically, in love, that people can see a God who is not fickle, but just, who is legal, but not legalistic, a God of love.