

STUDY 14

Useless Legalism

1. How can you distinguish a genuine Christian from a person who is just religious?

A religious person focusses on external matters such as rules and traditions, whereas a genuine Christian has a relationship with God through Jesus and has a pure heart. A religious person thinks that their right relationship with God depends on keeping rules, whereas a genuine Christian rejoices in having the gift of righteousness through faith in Jesus.

That said, it's not really our business to make judgements about other people's faith except for pastoral purposes. It is important not to label people and make assumptions on the basis of their denomination or church tradition. Jesus clashed with the Pharisees because of what they did and said, and in particular their hypocrisy. But there were some 'good' Pharisees too, such as Nicodemus who had spiritual insight and recognised Jesus was from God (*John 3*). Even if Nicodemus had not yet been 'born again' he was certainly moving in the right direction. There are many who are on a journey of faith and a good response would be to affirm the genuine faith that they have and point them in the right direction. Many such people would not have thought of themselves as good (*Luke 18:9-14*), but Jesus was always on the look-out for outsiders moving in the right direction, such as Zacchaeus and the good Samaritan. Jesus commended the woman who gave a small offering to God because it was very costly to her in relation to what she had (*Mark 13*). She was living sincerely in the light of what she understood. Such people are very receptive when truth is explained to them.

So it is important to know that the world does not divide simply into two groups, genuine Christians and religious hypocrites. There are God-seekers and people at different stages of their faith journey, although the focus of this particular passage concerns Jesus' clash with religious hypocrites.

Jesus said, **"By their fruits you will know them."** (*Matthew 7:15-20*). James wrote that **'...faith without deeds is dead.'** So genuine faith will show itself in action. That is why Paul encouraged the believers at Ephesus to **'...walk in a manner worthy of their calling.'** (*Ephesians 4:1*). So although we don't live by keeping rules to earn righteousness, genuine faith is expressed in the way we live; a life of love for God and our neighbour, in the practicalities of daily life.

2. Were the Pharisees right to make an issue over hand-washing; after all it's just good hygiene?

Hand-washing in Jesus' day was not a matter of hygiene. It was about ceremonial cleansing. So, its meaning was symbolic and pointed to the need to be clean before God. Therefore, it was what it stood for that was important and especially for the priests who served God in the temple. Sadly many of the Pharisees who focussed on this issue were missing the point. To reduce it to saying "I'm a good person because I keep the rule about hand-washing" was a misuse and misrepresentation of its purpose.

Today, in our cultures, hand-washing is an altogether different thing. It is a matter of hygiene because now we understand that many infectious diseases are caused by bacteria and viruses, and spread by contact. So hand-washing is an important part of keeping ourselves and others healthy. The Pharisees knew nothing of such things so they were not correct to make an issue over hand-washing.

3. One of the problems with religiosity expressed by keeping rules and regulations is that this promotes a sense of *self-righteousness*. What's wrong with self-righteousness?

When the New Testament speaks of righteousness, two things are envisaged. Firstly, our standing before God - not guilty and therefore no condemnation! Secondly, right living and thinking - not sinning against God or our neighbours.

In relation to the first, even the very best we can do falls short of God's perfection and glory. We all fall short. Nobody is righteous enough to stand before God with a clean conscience. So self-righteousness is simply not good enough.

Secondly, in relation to right living, we may do better than others, especially those who are not trying. If we compare ourselves with them, our self righteousness will lead to pride and (if we are not careful) hypocrisy.

Fortunately, God has graciously provided help for us. In relation to the first, we can be reckoned righteous before Him through trusting (faith) in Jesus. Sinners *yes*, but forgiven sinners and reckoned righteous sinners. In relation to the second, lived-out righteousness, God provides the Holy Spirit to live within us and provide the help we need.

We can take no credit for either. They are God's gift given to those who know that they really need it. There is no room for pride but plenty of room for gratitude.

4. Some traditions can be helpful. For example, church meetings starting at 11.00am. That's a useful tradition. Imagine that Jesus and one of the Pharisees from Jerusalem were in your church next Sunday and you arrive late because on the way you stopped to help someone who had suffered a bicycle accident. What do you think that Pharisee would say? What do you think Jesus would say?

The wrong sort of Pharisee would probably say something to make you feel guilty or condemned for your 'sin of lateness' whilst inwardly nursing a smug feeling for his own punctuality.

Jesus would probably ask if you were alright and inquire after your welfare. On learning the reason, He would commend you for your act of compassion. He might even store the information in His memory to use as one of His parables.

Life isn't always right / wrong, black / white, true / false. There are shades of grey. How might this affect thinking about this issue?

This thinking gives an appreciation for the limitations of rules as inflexible guides for living. Laws and regulations, even self imposed or unwritten, can be unhelpful because there really is no one-size-fits-all rule that fits every situation, as Jesus made clear when teaching about divorce.

Both Jesus and Paul talked about love. Jesus summed up the whole of the laws of Moses in two love commands. Paul talked about love being the fulfilment of the law.

Knowing this should help us to be slow to judge and quick to forgive and commend. To be sure there are some black-and-white issues but far more shades of grey. We should be especially gentle with those who are trying to do the right thing but fall short. We should seek to understand why people do the

things they do before condemning them. This is particularly important in dealing with children for whom being treated unfairly may be quite damaging.