

In search of...

Truth & Right

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Should We Be Picky?

Jesus' condemnation of the Jews, especially the Pharisees and Sadducees, is well-known and well-documented in the Gospels. Many Christians are rightly concerned about avoiding the same traps that snared the Pharisees and Sadducees. However, sometimes my brethren go too far in their avoidance. When it is pointed out that we should do things one way and not another because of a passage in the Bible, I'm occasionally told that I'm being legalistic, just like the Pharisees. These people believe that the Pharisee's failure was being too picky about the law. After all they emphasized the small, unimportant things like tithing spice and ignored the important matters such as love, justice and mercy. Therefore the question before us is, "Were the Pharisees too picky about the law?"

There are many things that the Pharisees were guilty of doing in regards to the law. For instance, they would "interpret" God's commands for the people. I can easily imagine that they viewed it as their duty to expand on God's laws so the people would have an easier time doing what God had commanded. However, in their eagerness, they ended up adding rules and regulations to the law that were never commanded by God. In

Matthew 15:1-11, the Pharisees charged the disciples of breaking tradition by not washing their hands before eating. The law of Moses never mention the need to wash before eating. This was an addition by man. There is nothing wrong with washing your hands, but you cannot claim someone is sinning when they fail to wash their hands. Jesus also points out that some of their traditions not only add to the law, but cancel portions of it. They used the law of giving to the temple to cancel the law requiring a child to care for his elderly parents. Therefore, one of the things the Pharisees were guilty of was modifying God's laws through additions and deletions and then using the modified laws as weapons against their enemies.

Another error that the Pharisees made was in their emphasis of the physical over the spiritual. The law of Moses contained both matters. The spiritual aspects of the law drove the physical demonstration of the spiritual principles. However, the Pharisees concentrated on physical things mentioned in the law and often ignored the spiritual principles entirely. In Matthew 23:23-24, Jesus praises the Pharisees for being careful to tithe even the contents of their spice rack, but he scolds them for ignoring

things such as love, justice, and mercy. Notice that Jesus did not tell them to stop tithing their spices; he warns them to put the spiritual first in their lives. The physical parts of the law would then come as a natural application of their spiritual life. By only focusing on the physical portions of the law, they end up looking good on the outside, but they remain corrupt on the inside (Matthew 23:25-31).

A third problem that the Pharisees had with the law was in their handling of two laws that apparently conflict. There are times that two laws cannot be followed at the same time. How do you determine which law to follow? An example of this is in Matthew 12:1-8. The Pharisees told the disciples that they should not be plucking heads of grain from a field they were passing because it was the Sabbath. On the Sabbath day, a Jew was not to do any work. However, we must notice that what the disciples were doing wasn't considered farming, nor were they gathering food for an entire meal. In particular, what they were doing was specifically allowed in Deuteronomy 23:25. It seems we have a conflict between two laws. One allows plucking grain as you pass by, and another forbids gathering food on the Sabbath. Which law should take precedent?

To answer the question, we must first understand the purpose of the law. Does a person blindly follow the law, even if it means that a person goes hungry? As Jesus points out in Matthew 12, this was not God's intention. Jesus gives an illustration: When David asked for food from the priest for he and his starving men, the priest gave him the bread from the table of showbread. This bread was suppose to be only eaten by the priests on the Sabbath. Non-priests were not to eat of this bread. And yet, God allowed David and his men to eat that bread without condemnation. This implies that God allows exceptions to his rules in order to show a weightier matter, in this case, mercy.

Jesus goes on to drive his point home by showing that the Old Law contained numerous examples that "no work" did not mean a total abstinence of

work. A prime example is in the work of the priests. They labor on the Sabbath day, yet their duties were not considered a violation of the Sabbath rules.

Finally, the Jews should have known that the Messiah would not violate God's law. They have had sufficient proof that Jesus was the Messiah and that God was with Jesus. Therefore, they should first assume that Jesus would be following God's law.

However, just because exceptions are allowed for weightier matters, we should not conclude that we can do whatever we feel like, so long as we can justify it in our own minds. God does expect his followers to be picky about His Law. Notice that in Matthew 23, Jesus never said that the Jews should not keep the law. In Matthew 23:3, Jesus tells the people to do as the law was taught by the Pharisees. However, they should avoid using the Pharisees as an example, since they do not follow their own teachings. As we pointed out before, in Matthew 23:23, Jesus told the Pharisees that they should be doing the picky things without leaving out the more important matters.

Let's take an example from the Old Law. In Numbers 20:1-13, Moses was commanded to bring forth water for the people by speaking to a rock. Moses was expected to follow God's word precisely, without any alterations. Even though on an earlier, similar occasion, God had told Moses to strike the rock with Aaron's rod, Moses was expected not to do this on this occasion. Even though God did not say "Do not strike the rock." Even though God specifically told Moses to take Aaron's rod with him when he addressed the people. Moses violated God's command in two ways that day, he altered God's command without God's permission and he took the glory for the event for himself and Aaron and not for God.

Another example can be found when Saul was told to wipe out the Amorites in 1 Samuel 15:13-26. Once again, Saul was expected to follow God's word precisely, without any alterations. The minor changes that Saul tried to introduce were not allowed, even though Saul justified it by claiming to serve

another good (sacrificing to God).

God even expects pickiness in reading His word. Have you ever considered Paul's argument that the "seed" in the promise to Abraham applied to Jesus in Galatians 3:16? The key to Paul's argument was the fact that seed was singular and not plural. A single letter made a large difference in the meaning of a passage!

However, keeping God's word isn't an excuse to do unrighteousness. Some parts of God's will are more important than others. In Matthew 23:23, we learned that love, justice, and mercy are weightier matters. Jesus told the Pharisees in Matthew 12:7 to learn what it means "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Some of God's laws are for the benefit of man. God doesn't need sacrifices; men need the sacrifices. See Psalms 50:7-23. What God wants from men is righteousness. God's laws were never meant to be used as an excuse to avoid doing the important things. Which is more important, keeping a Sabbath rule or letting someone go hungry? Justice and righteousness is more acceptable to God than sacrifices (Proverbs 21:3). What God desires is mercy and a true knowledge of God (Hosea 6:6).

Our first priority to God is obedience, not self-sacrifices (Jeremiah 7:21-23). This was Saul's problem. He altered God's word to fulfill a technicality of the law. However, his alteration was not what God wanted. In a similar manner we cannot alter God's will to suit our own desires. However, God's laws can be altered to suit God's desires. We cannot hide behind the rules and avoid our duty. Too often, Christians "lock up" when they are faced with a conflict. Someone needs help, but we don't want to violate God's law by helping someone in the wrong way, so in the end we do not help at all so as to not break a law. What happened to mercy? Where is the love?

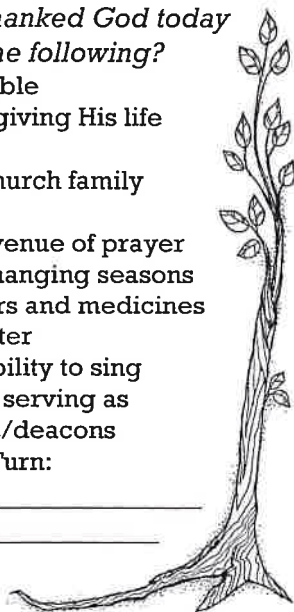
While God expects us to be picky about keeping his law, we must remember that a precise keeping of His Will will not save us in and of itself (Micah 6:6-8). Our first priority is to be put God first in our life (Mark 12:33-34). The rest will follow as a natural consequence.

Jeffrey W. Hamilton

God gave you a gift of
86,400
seconds today. Have
you used one to say
THANK YOU?

*Have you thanked God today
for any of the following?*

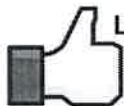
- The Bible
- Jesus giving His life for us
- Our church family
- Jobs
- The avenue of prayer
- The changing seasons
- Doctors and medicines
- Laughter
- The ability to sing
- Those serving as elders/deacons
- Your Turn:



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An Unclean Spirit

N G K D U G L A K Z Q V Z X A C U V T P
 V M O J B Q S H A C K L E S D B M Y O U
 H A A T K D M E W C L O T H E D L Y A N
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DIRECTIONS: Look up the scripture in the Bible, and find the answer in the crossword above.

- Mark 5:2, The man with the spirit lived among the _____
 Mark 5:4, He had been bound with _____ and chains
 Mark 5:5, He was always _____ himself with stones
 Mark 5:6, When he saw _____ from afar, he fell down before Him
 Mark 5:7, "I adjure you by God, do not _____ me."
 Mark 5:9, "My name is _____, for we are many."
 Mark 5:11, A great herd of pigs was _____ there on the hillside
 Mark 5:13, The herd, numbering about two _____, all drowned in the sea
 Mark 5:14, The _____ fled and told it in the city and in the country
 Mark 5:15, They saw the man _____ and in his right mind
 Mark 5:17, They began to beg Jesus to _____ from their region
 Mark 5:20, He began to _____ in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him