

The “Lawyer-Like” Interpretation of Scripture

by Walton Weaver

When conservatives are charged with taking a "lawyer-like" approach to the interpretation of Scripture, they must read further before they can know which method of interpretation the writer is alleging against them. In the first century the Pharisees, who were greatly influenced by the scribes or lawyers of their day, were divided into two schools of thought. These different schools of thought reflect the liberal and conservative approaches to the interpretation of the law. The two methods of interpretation are well illustrated in the two leading teachers of the day.

Hillel and Shammai

Hillel (c. 60 B.C.-c. A.D. 20) gained a prominence among the rabbis of the first century due to his excellence in the elucidation of legal rules from the Scripture. He had a great zeal for Torah study (Torah = the law), and he became a model for later students. He had come to Jerusalem to study biblical exegesis, where he was trained by Shemaiah and Abtalion, two of the early great expositors of the law. Hillel was either the father or grandfather of the Gamaliel we read about in Acts 5:33-40. He is described by Luke as "a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people." Paul received training "according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers" from this great teacher (Acts 22:3). Hillel is usually thought of as belonging to the most liberal interpreters of the law, favoring a freer interpretation of the biblical text.

Shammai (c. 50 B.C.-c. A.D. 30) was more conservative in his interpretations of the text of Scripture. These two different methods of interpretation are well illustrated on the subject of divorce. It is likely that the rivalry between these two schools is reflected in the questions put before Jesus on this subject as recorded in Matthew 19:1 ff. In his answer to their question Jesus evidently sided with Shammai against Hillel. The question was, on what grounds might divorce be allowed according to the law? The question likely had the statement from Deuteronomy 24:1 in mind. According to this passage of Scripture, Moses allowed a man to write his wife a bill of divorcement if he "found some uncleanness in her." Hillel interpreted this passage liberally, saying that a man might divorce his wife for the most trivial of reasons, including even that of putting too much seasoning in his food! Shammai, on the other hand, interpreted this passage from Moses strictly, permitting divorce only on the grounds of unchastity.

The technical terms used of rabbis when issuing authoritative decisions were "binding" and "loosing," the same terms used by Jesus when speaking of the apostles' power to bind and loose in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18. To bind was to declare an action unlawful, and to loose was to declare it lawful. We see this authority exercised by the scribes on the subject of gathering wood in the two differing points of view held by Hillel and Shammai. The liberal interpretation of this law vs. the conservative method of

interpretation is again made clear: "Concerning gathering wood on a feast day, the school of Shammai binds (that is, forbids) it - the school of Hillel looses (that is, permits) it."

Some think that in the decades prior to the catastrophe of A.D. 70 the more conservative attitude of the Shammaites tended to prevail among the Pharisees generally, but that from the following reconstruction onward it was the gentler viewpoint of the Hillelites that won out. This means that during this period the division within the Pharisees came to an end.

Learning from the Pharisees

Whether one was of the liberal or conservative schools of thought among the Pharisees, the problems generally were the same, because both groups tended to major in minors (Matt. 23:23). The Pharisees were right in longing for a righteous Israel and the hope of the coming Messianic kingdom. But, as so often is the case, their attempt to be faithful to the law in every area of their life led them into extremes. Bringing their lives into subjection to the law in all of these areas was a noble and worthy aim. This was no doubt what motivated them. Yet, the excesses were not to be excused. The hypocrisy (whether known or not) on the part of some, and the addition of the traditions of the elders to the law — traditions which they had received from the scribes — were not justified. One's concern for righteousness should not be allowed to drive him to such extremes. Too often those who are properly motivated to live righteous become convinced that they have attained the righteousness they seek. This was true of the Pharisees. Yet, unknowingly they rejected their only hope of righteousness.

Such vices and virtues of Pharisaism are a good reminder to all of us that no matter where we are in our Christian lives, the Pharisees have much to say to us today. Their desire for righteousness should be regarded by all both liberals and conservatives alike as attractive and biblical. But their love for praise and pomp, and their devotion to the traditions of the elders which they received directly from the scribes, should be a warning to all of those who profess to be Christians. We say this not just to the liberal minded among us, as some might think, but to the conservatives as well.

Those who are liberal in their interpretation of Scripture may charge their conservative brethren with legalism, but if legalism was the sin of the Pharisees, what was it that made them guilty of this sin? Not only is it sinful to trust in one's self as though he is "right" 100% of the time, or right in all of his beliefs and practices with no possibility of being wrong, but it is also sinful to presume upon God and take liberties where God has given none, or to add to the word of God like the Pharisees did in bringing in their human traditions and thereby making their worship vain. One does not have the "right" to throw out all pattern authority and change the laws of God into liberties.

The liberal interpreter tends to loose where God has not loosed; but he also tends to bind where God has not bound. The Pharisees exemplified both tendencies. Someone may say, "But isn't it the conservative interpreter that is more likely to bind where God

has not bound"? He may of course do that, but not necessarily so. The tendency to make laws is a liberal act, as we have seen from our study of Matthew 15:1-9.

Isn't it possible for one to be a "Biblical literalist" without inventing laws for God? A person may interpret Scripture strictly without trusting in himself. A true conservative simply trusts in God to reveal to him what he should do and how it should be done. He believes the Bible is the word of God and that whatever he does must be authorized by God from Scripture. He acts on the premise that he is not permitted to take from the word of God or add to it. Shammai was a biblical literalist; he had the mindset of a true conservative. He was what some would call a "strict constructionist." He interpreted Scripture strictly, as Paul did, and Paul also taught Christians to walk in the same way, i.e., "strictly" ("circumspectly," in Eph. 5:15).

There were others in the first century from among the Pharisees who belonged to this class. On one occasion when Jesus' life was threatened by Herod "there came certain of the Pharisees, saying unto him, Get thee out, and depart hence: for Herod will kill thee" (Luke 13:31). These reflect a more noble element in Palestinian Pharisaism. Joseph of Arimathaea, "an honourable counsellor, which also waited for the kingdom of God," who came to make request of Pilate for Jesus' body (Mark 15:43-46), and Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night (John 3:1; 19:39), were also of this class of Pharisees. Some think that the chief Pharisee who had Jesus for dinner belongs in this class as well (Luke 14:1).

If one could be a Pharisee and not be a legalist (one who trusts in himself and his own righteousness for his salvation), like those we have just noted, could not one who is a Christian be such a person and yet not be a legalist? Such a person believes in interpreting Scripture strictly, but he does not believe in law-keeping as a way of salvation. Nor does he trust in his own performance in keeping the law of God. He knows he is saved by the blood of Christ, and that, even if he were able to do all it is his duty to do (which he is not, of course), he is yet an unprofitable servant (Luke 17:10).

Any person who has been in the Lord's church for a number of years surely knows that there are no doubt some among the conservative interpreters of the Bible who need to come to have a better understanding of this subject. Although J. D. Thomas has in years past defended some things that many of us strongly oppose, the following observation made by him in his book, *Harmonizing Hermeneutics*, on the subject of "the legalistic mindset" is worthy of consideration:

All of us in the Restoration Movement still have some legalistic tendencies in our outlook because the movement from earliest times has emphasized an obedience to commands, and we preached this to our religious neighbors. As a group, we admittedly have spent much thought, comparatively, on first principles and not enough on second, or later, principles. Our total understanding has remained, for many of us, at an elementary level, and we have thus

not yet risen above an obedience mindset in service to Christian duty.

Many of our people feel a crucial obligation to worship weekly, but only on Sunday morning. Obedience is consciously and deliberately held to a minimum. Probably no congregation among us enjoys as many in attendance on Sunday night as Sunday morning. We are willing to obey minimally (to save our souls from hell), but not to do any more than the legal contract calls for. We want to get credit for punching the time-clock each Sunday, but we really do not care about the overall success of the Lord's cause. Our hearts do not ache for the lost. This attitude is not motivated by love for the Lord and our neighbors — our hearts are not really into putting God first in our lives. We should love God (and our fellow-man) with all our hearts!

The denominational world has little respect for us because it believes that we preach only:

The right church;
The necessity of baptism;
Vocal music only;
Christianity is just a new-model law (no grace);
What the Holy Spirit *doesn't* do.

This wrong conception, which is even promoted by some enemies of the church, certainly is not true of all of us, but in general, many do not realize that we preach Christ crucified as the central theme of our message, nor does it recognize that we have any deep consciousness of our being "one with the Lord as one spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17) - that each of us is "married to Christ" and enjoys a strong spiritual union.

As a people, we have not yet really comprehended God's grace. We still believe that we save ourselves. For us to realize fully that we have a Savior and that we are saved because of Him is difficult (82-83).

For people who depend on their own perfect rule-keeping in hopes of being saved, we encourage them to lean on Jesus. He can save us, but we cannot achieve perfection ourselves. This is the essence of Christianity. God sent Him down to save us because we cannot save ourselves. This is why He had to die for us — there was no other way. Jesus had to die.

Too many of us believe that one unforgiven trivial sin will send us to hell, even if we have otherwise spent a lifetime of faithfulness. We want our last breath to be a prayer of forgiveness so that we will not die with even the least bit of guilt still staining our souls. We pray, "Lord, save us, if we have been found faithful," when the truth is no one of us is going to be faithful in the sense of keeping all the commands perfectly. Such an attitude reflects pure legalism; it is based upon a human merit concept of law-keeping as the basis or ground of salvation rather than upon faith in the sin-offering of an atoning Christ who died to become our Savior.

We cannot preach the true Gospel to the world unless we understand it ourselves, and practice it in our lives (84).

Lessons from the Lawyers

Not all Pharisees were lawyers, or scribes, nor were all scribes members of the sect of the Pharisees. It is likely that the first several verses of Matthew 23 (through v. 22), and then verses 29-36, are directed at the scribes, and then verses 23-28 are leveled against the Pharisees, even though the characteristic address, "scribes and Pharisees," is used all the way through the first section. Even though Jesus uses this same address in verse 25, he immediately uses the singular (v. 26) "thou blind Pharisee" as he continues. In Luke's parallel account the two groups are addressed separately. The scribes are addressed in Luke 11:46-52; 20:46-47, and the Pharisees in Luke 11:39-42, 44.

The charges leveled against the scribes were: (1) imposing very strict religious laws (the traditions, as pointed out earlier) on others, while avoiding them themselves; (2) building "tombs of the prophets" while ready to condemn to death men sent by God; (3) keeping their learning secret and so cutting off the people's access to the kingdom of God, while making no use themselves of their own knowledge; (4) inordinate pride in dress, in salutation, and in order of seating, particularly with regard to the synagogues.

The charges against the Pharisees were: (1) hypocrisy in carrying out the laws on purity, while remaining impure inwardly; (2) hypocrisy in paying tithes on certain vegetables not required by the law, while neglecting the religious and moral obligations contained in it (see Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* 235-236 on these points). What we learn from this, according to Jeremias, is that the reproaches against the Pharisees "have absolutely nothing to do with a theological education; they are leveled at men who lead their lives according to the demands of the religious laws of Pharisaic scribes," whereas the reproaches against the lawyers or scribes "have a general bearing on their scribal education and its resulting privileges in social life."

So what may we learn from the scribes? We should learn to be more careful in doing what God has said. This is the only way to be sure not to leave undone the weightier matters of God's law. Had the scribes been more careful in doing God's will they would

not have put the traditions of men above his law. It is no mark of spirituality to be indifferent to "commandments" that come from God, perhaps due to some kind of aversion one might have to "law" in relation to Christ. Paul told the Corinthians that the things he was writing to them "are the commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37).

There is also a warning to be found here against selfish pride. On this subject, Bales issues this warning: "We must exercise great care lest we become proud that we are not Pharisees (or scribes — *ww*); and lest we try to prove it by freeing ourselves from all rules and principles of God. If we do this we are endeavoring to justify ourselves; for we are relying not upon what God has said, and upon His mercy, but upon our own inclinations and opinions" (*Woe Unto You* 131).

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