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ONE STORY, TWO VIEWS

Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left. And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God. The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth. (Matt 27:38-44)

And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Lk 23:39-43)

One story, open to two views. Perhaps which view you take depends a lot on your background and set of beliefs. But what are the two views?

The standard take on this story is that Matthew tells what happened early in the day, and that Luke reflects a change of heart in one of the robbers (mistranslated thieves in the King James Version) later in the day. Early on, both of the men who were crucified with Jesus, hearing the rulers of the Jews mocking, follow suit. They combine in throwing his current condition in his face. Later on, however, one of the two turns on his partner, exhibits unprecedented faith that Jesus is an innocent king, and asks that his change of heart be remembered. Interestingly, many of those who hold this position use it to deny the importance of immersion even though: a) this was forty days before the message of immersion for forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus was preached, and; b) the robber never sought forgiveness, only some vague "remembrance." (Granted, Jesus promised they would be together later in the day. But more on that later.)

The other view is that both Matthew and Luke are totally correct. That is, Matthew recounts the robbers railing on Jesus, and Luke recounts the words one of them used. In this view there is no repentance, or even acknowledgement of kingship. The robbers words are to be taken sarcastically. In spite of Luke's use of the word "rebuke," this view might rephrase the robber to say, "Go ahead and mock him. After all we are all in the same boat; it's just that he claims to be innocent. But doesn't everybody who is being executed make the same claim? You who claim to be a king, remember me when you come into this supposed kingdom. But wait, you are dying on a cross. How can you come into that kingdom?" This fits nicely with Matthew's account. But what of the reply Jesus made? "This day you will be with me in paradise?" Is that actually granting forgiveness? Or, if the man made his comments sarcastically, might not Jesus be saying (using the literal meaning of paradise) that it does no good to mock, since by nightfall all three would be buried in a garden somewhere.

Two views. Nor, ultimately, does it matter which one you take. If the latter, it is true that both robbers and Jesus were buried. The difference is that, contrary to the robbers' belief, he rose the third day, coming into the kingdom he preached. If the former, it may emphasize that Jesus had authority to forgive sins while he was on the earth. Neither view impacts our own salvation. Neither view can be used to prove or disprove the necessity of immersion. It is nice to believe that Jesus was able to convert a man simply by his actions while being executed on a stake. Maybe in this the common view reinforces an innate faith in the goodness of man. That can never be a bad thing.

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A TRADITION OF LEGALISM

A man died and went to heaven. Saint Peter did the orientation tour. He showed him God's throne. He showed him his mansion. He showed him the pearly gates. As they were walking around, the man noticed a group of people off to the side, away from anyone else. They were singing praise to God and seemed to be having a good time, but they all stayed together away from anyone else. When he asked about this, Peter replied, "Oh, don't mind them. They are all from the Church of Christ. They just think they are the only ones up here."

That joke was popular in the 1960's. There are even places today where people might find it funny (or insulting, depending on what church name you wear). At the risk of being accused of "airing our dirty laundry," there was a time when that joke may have been accurate. The Church of Christ has a long tradition of legalism.

Perhaps from the start certain terms must be defined. Legalism is a word that has long had a negative connotation, in and out of church circles. Certain towns or sections of the United States are known as "speed traps"

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because the law enforcement officers make no provision for variation from the posted speed limits. Some jurists have a reputation as "hanging judges" because they will not consider mitigating factors in their decisions. In religion, legalism is sometimes defined as a belief that there is right and there is wrong, or there is what is written in scripture and there is what is not written, and there is no room for anything in between. Others might define it as a tendency to condemn other people for what you personally think is wrong. Essentially, then, legalism is defined by each individual based on whether they are "a little liberal, or else a little conservative." And even that becomes hard to define because a conservative is a person who wants to make me do something I don't want to do; a liberal is a person who wants to do something I don't want him to do.

A legalist doesn't see himself as a legalist; he sees himself as only doing what God expects. He sees right and wrong, and may allow for mercy but only on a broad scale. Most people who would call him a legalist are, in his opinion, trying to get away with violating God's law without suffering the consequences. On the other hand, the one labeling another as a legalist places a strong emphasis

on God's forgiveness, and may not make allowances for God's justice. In truth, both are probably right, and wrong.

Another term that might need to be defined in this context is authority. One person may see the Bible as "the complete, authoritative word of God." Another may view the Bible as God's general guidelines for man. Still more may hold a position somewhere in between. So some that might be called legalists are so because they follow the old Restoration maxim that we can only do things religiously if we have "direct command, necessary inference, or apostolic example." Others are called legalists because they demand adherence to commands that go beyond that same standard. If the authority for all that we do in religion is the word of God, the Bible, then anything that is not specifically directed, necessarily inferred, or traditionally practiced by the early church is either forbidden or permitted only on the basis of tradition. Traditions may not necessarily be wrong, but they cannot be bound on others. For instance, the Bible says nothing about church buildings, but that, in itself, does not prevent churches from erecting buildings in which to meet. They just cannot insist that every church spend the money to erect a building.

A legalistic people

People are, in general, legalistic. We like boundaries, although we may sometimes test them. Every society has laws, and methods of enforcement of those laws. Without law there is anarchy; and with anarchy there is fear and uncertainty. As long as we agree with the laws, we insist that they be enforced. If a child molester is identified, we want him locked up, and everyone who knew about it and should have reported it properly chastised (even if they have subsequently died). On the other hand, if we think the speed limits are too low we lose our legalistic tendencies. Nevertheless, if one is caught breaking the law even if we disagree with the law, we usually insist on imposing the proper punishment.

As legalistic beings, we want to know the boundaries. We want to stay within the law, but sometimes just barely. So we try to fine-tune the law. If the speed limit is 65 miles per hour, we reason that the police allow a ten mile per hour leeway because of the possibility that the radars may have a margin of error. Therefore, to many people that posted speed limit becomes 75; but cover your ears if the same driver comes upon someone only driving 55. Some have described our tendency as wanting to drive as close to the edge of a cliff without falling off. We have to know the boundaries so we can get as close to them as legally possible.

It is this tendency that makes us want lists of sins. The rabbis, for instance, have listed 613 *mitvot*, of which

365 are “thou shalt not” commands. The actual content of the list may vary in some respects depending on which rabbi you take as authoritative. In Paul’s writings there are frequent lists of “sins” or things that will keep one out of the kingdom. Thus teachers of the Bible often hear questions introduced with “Is it a sin to...” or “Will I go to hell if I...”, when the real question should be, “Am I in Christ and, therefore, forgiven?”

Another result of our “sin orientation” is the concept of putting a hedge around the law. If God says your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), then you must avoid anything that profanes that temple. To do so, maybe you should avoid some things that the Bible does not address. We then list a number of things that are not specifically forbidden (or even implied), such as all use of alcohol or caffeine, smoking, or other legal drugs, making them sins where the Bible does not necessarily do so. In the Southwestern U.S. in the middle 1900’s many churches considered it wrong for boys and girls to swim together, because the bodily exposure might encourage lust. (As if teens are not hormonally challenged even when fully dressed.) Other prohibited items or activities include gambling (or even playing cards in any form), dancing, or “anything that looks evil.” The idea is that if we don’t let a person even get close to really sinning they are safe. In truth, it doesn’t work. People will sin anyway. The result in the Churches of Christ in the mid-1900’s was a tendency for children to do these things out of simple rebellion. Many went further and left the church altogether because they considered their elders hypocrites because they could not present clear scriptural backing for these prohibitions.

Legalism and Mercy

Are legalism and mercy (sometimes miscalled grace) exclusive of each other? Can a legalist make room for mercy? Must one who believes in God’s mercy ignore the law? While the concepts may appear contradictory, in fact they are not. God is a just God (Isa 45:21) who shows mercy (Ex 34:6) If God can have both as an attribute, so can we.

The problem is knowing when to be one and when to be the other. God leaves a lot of things up to our own choice. In those things we must be merciful. If it is not clearly a violation of God’s will, we are wrong to make it a condition of salvation.

That being said, there are times when insistence on keeping the law is expected. Laws exist for a reason. In the secular realm it is sometimes said that there is a dead body behind every law; if somebody had not died or been seriously injured nobody would have seen fit to write the law. When God gave the Law of Moses to the Jewish people, he clearly expected compliance. “And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the

statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them.” (Deut 5:1)

Accusations of legalism often occur when one person or group of people chooses the Bible as their authority in religion, and another chooses their own opinion. Sometimes it happens when one person puts excessive emphasis on certain scriptures while ignoring the effect of others. An example might be the issue of the necessity of immersion for salvation. One group emphasizes God’s mercy, and accuses others who see immersion as a key to that mercy as being legalistic. Then meaningless, but emotion-laden, phrases get thrown around. The one might talk of “works salvation,” (even though immersion in water is not a work in any sense of the word) while at the same time insisting that one cannot be saved without saying a prayer or “asking Jesus to come into your heart” (which does qualify as a work).

God has not left mankind without law. He expects more than just a relationship; or more to the point, he expects a relationship based on obedience. If Jason Gray’s

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song is right, and we can break rules and lie to others as long as we love God, and if “keeping oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27) is merely a stone around our feet, then God is insane to have created laws that he does not expect people to obey. Even those who disagree with some laws often complain when those with which they agree have no method of enforcement. If we are not expected to keep laws, then they should not be laws.

Thus we have two views of our tradition of legalism. When legalism leads us to make laws God has not made, we are wrong. More than that, we are in danger of driving away those who see us claim biblical authority only but then go beyond what the Bible says. When we follow this kind of legalism, then the accusations should stick and cause us to change. On the other hand, when our legalism is firmly and accurately based in God’s word, then when someone accuses us of being legalistic we should take that as a badge of honor. When people accuse us of being narrow-minded, we can proudly quote “narrow the way that leadeth unto life.” (Matt 7:14) Better to be narrow and right than broad-minded and condemned.

CASTING THE FIRST STONE

In John 8 we read a story about a time the Jewish scribes and Pharisees tested Jesus. They brought him a woman whom they claimed was “taken in adultery, in the very act.” Their wording was very precise because they were attempting to state a legal charge. They even mentioned that the law said such a person was to be stoned. Jesus seemed to ignore them until they persisted in their question. At that point Jesus delivered the line, “Let him that is without sin cast the first stone.” Thereupon all the accusers left, and Jesus sent the woman away.

Many people have pointed out the obvious flaw in this story. If the woman was taken in the very act of adultery there must have been a man also taken. He also would be subject to stoning. It seems that Jesus could have used this as a way to respond. But he didn’t. Or at least it appears that he did not. Some people do suggest that what Jesus meant by his statement was “let him who is without *this* sin cast the first stone. That, if it were true, could mean that he was either directing that any man in the group who had never committed adultery initiate the punishment, or that he knew the man who had been caught with her was present and he was asking him to admit his own guilt by casting the first stone. Either of those interpretations, however, ask that we insert a word into the scripture that most authorities say is not there.

If that “this” is not there, then what was Jesus saying and why did the men leave? On the face of it, he is simply stating that if any of the men were totally sinless they could initiate the punishment. The problem with that interpretation is that such a requirement would negate the whole Law of Moses. If he is saying that the only person who could “throw the switch” was one who was totally sinless, then he is also saying that any stoning in the past

were invalid, even the one in Leviticus 24 that was specifically commanded by God.

If he is not saying that only those who had never sinned were allowed to cast the first stone, then what is Jesus saying? One possibility is that he is reminding them that if they are going to ask him a question about the Law, they should be very careful that they are bringing charges according to the law. In reminding them of the law he was reminding them that conviction required at least two witnesses. Included in this would be the implicit accusation that they were showing partiality by only accusing the woman, but it goes beyond that.

In Deuteronomy 13:6-11 one of the provisions of the law for stoning a person who tries to draw one away to worship other gods is that the person who heard the accused was to be the first to cast the stones. Presumably that condition would apply in all cases of stoning. If so, then Jesus is simply asking who the primary witnesses are. Those who caught the couple in their sin should step forward and take the responsibility of initiating the punishment.

If this is an accurate interpretation of the incident, then what of the phrase “him that is without sin?” One of the Ten Commandments prohibited falsely witnessing against another. In that context, Jesus may be telling the men that he will answer their question if he can find two men willing to cast the first stone; that is, who are willing to admit that they truly caught the woman in the very act of sin. If nobody was willing to certify that they were true witnesses (without the sin of bringing a false accusation), then the question of whether to stone the woman or not was moot; they were caught trying to test him with a false case.