

## Legalist Or Lover Of God: Which One Are You?

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### Introduction:

According to **I Timothy 1:5**, the goal of Christian teaching is love. Jesus in **Matthew 22:37** taught that the greatest commandment is to love God. Why should we serve God? How should we serve Him? With what attitude should we serve God? The answer to each of these questions is love. Yet, far too often, the approach Christians take to serving God is not about love but about legalism, drawing lines and keeping laws. In **Luke 7:38-50**, Jesus was invited into the home of a Pharisee for a meal. In this scene, we are privileged to witness the difference between serving God from these two approaches. We meet Simon the Pharisee who was a legalist and we meet an unnamed sinful woman who truly loved Jesus. Examine this text, contrasting these two characters and searching yourself to see which one you are and which one you want to be.

### Discussion:

- I. The legalist asks, "Where is the line that I may draw near to it?"  
The lover of God asks, "Where is Christ that I may draw near to Him?"
  - A. In **vs. 44-46**, Jesus rebuked Simon for not being hospitable to Him. Simon had not washed Jesus' feet, greeted Him with a kiss or anointed Him with oil. But had not Simon invited Jesus into his own home for a meal? What more could Jesus want? I can almost hear Simon saying following this rebuke, "Show me in the Law where it says I have to wash your feet, greet you with a kiss or anoint you with oil. You cannot prove that. I have had you into my home. You cannot call me inhospitable. You are making up laws for God." Legalists are not so because they require perfect law keeping. Legalists want to know what the law requires so they can know when they can stop. They want to know where the line is. Some have higher lines than others, but the issue is still about lines.
  - B. The sinful woman, however, did not seek a minimum requirement. She wanted to know where Jesus was so she could draw near to Him. And so, she drew near to Jesus, doing far more than any would claim was necessary. Why did she do so much? Jesus said it was love (**vs. 47**). Therefore, she did not ask, "What do I have to do?" She asked, "What more can I do?"
  - C. Paul demonstrated these contrasting concepts in **I Timothy 1:5-11** when he claimed that the goal of Christian instruction is love. But there are some who desired to be teachers of the law. Then Paul said something strange: "... the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless ..." (ESV). This cannot mean there is no law for the righteous to follow (cf. **I Corinthians 9:21**). Paul's point is the requirements and prohibitions of law are given to condemn the unrighteous for their unrighteousness. They are not given as requirements for righteousness. What is the requirement for the righteous? Love from a pure heart, good conscience and sincere faith. Obviously that will be in keeping with the law, because the one who loves God keeps His commandments (**I John 5:3**).
  - D. This makes perfect sense. Because, as Paul taught in **Galatians 3:21**, there is no law that could be given which could actually provide life. Therefore, righteousness does not come by law but by faith in Christ (**Philippians 3:9**). Why then do Christians spend their time arguing over minimum legalistic requirements instead of just drawing nearer to Christ? I believe it is because very few Christians grasp God's true minimum requirement. Most Christians believe God's minimum requirements for us have to do with a certain level of good works or moral living. That is not the case. God's minimum requirement is growth (**II Peter 1:5-11**). As long as you are growing, the line you are holding today is good. But God expects growth by tomorrow. And the more the legalist argues that he is doing enough and we should not expect anymore, the more he shows he is not meeting God's minimum requirement.
- II. The legalist says, "Look at how righteous I am compared to other people."  
The lover of God says, "Look at how sinful I am compared to Jesus."
  - A. Our approach to serving Christ will affect our standard with which we judge spiritual maturity. Why did Simon believe he could touch Jesus but the sinful woman should not (**vs. 39**)? Because he compared himself to others and he knew he was better than her.

- B. But, to whom did the sinful woman compare herself? Jesus. She knew her unrighteousness. She knew how little she deserved to be near Jesus or to touch Him. Jesus saw this mindset when He highlighted the fact that she did not give Him a kiss of greeting, but rather continually kissed His feet (**vs. 45**).
- C. When we serve God out of legalism and establish lines of minimum requirement, we naturally tend to consider ourselves based on how much better we adhere to those minimum requirements than others do or how much farther past those lines we live than others do. Thus, the legalistic Pharisees considered themselves righteous because of how they compared to others (**cf. Luke 18:11-12**). But when we serve God out of love, we do not focus on minimum requirements and we do not compare ourselves to others based on meeting minimum requirements. Rather, we strive to draw near to God (**James 4:8**). We recognize that we are not sinners because we are worse than others, but because we fall short of the glory of God (**Romans 3:23**). We are not holy when we are better than others, but when we are like God (**I Peter 1:15-16**). Some have ridiculed this position because it has led some to fear. They are afraid they just won't make it. But keep in mind what Peter went on to say in **I Peter 1:17**. God judges without partiality, so conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear.

III. The legalist says, "Look at how little I need forgiveness."

The lover of God says, "Look at all the sins for which I have needed forgiveness."

- A. Why did Simon think Jesus should not touch this woman? She was a sinner (**vs. 39**). What then did Simon think of himself? He must not be much of a sinner or need much forgiveness. However, this woman was a sinner and knew it. She knew how much forgiveness she needed. She knew how much forgiveness was being extended to her by Jesus.
- B. Jesus' story in **vss. 41-42** describes the difference between these two. And of course, we can see how this contrast naturally came from the previous. Because the legalist was comparing himself to other people, he did not appear all that bad. He surely did not need as much forgiveness as these others. Because the woman was comparing herself to the holiness of Jesus, she knew full well how much she needed it.
- C. Consider that story for just a moment. Regarding monetary debt, we can clearly see one was forgiven of a greater debt than the other. But what consequences did both of those debtors face? They both faced the same consequence of being stuck in debtor's prison until they could pay the last penny of what they owed (**cf. Matthew 5:26**). While one may have been forgiven of a lesser debt, he was not saved from a lesser consequence. If perhaps Simon had focused more on what forgiveness was saving him from and less about what he needed forgiveness for, he would have been better off.
- D. Digging a little deeper, however, we find that this parable does not match the actuality of these two individuals and their sins, but rather their own perception of their sins. In **Matthew 23:1-36**, Jesus described the sins of the Pharisees and they were not small. They were arrogant, self-centered, extortionists, liars, unjust, unmerciful and murderers. In fact, at one point in this text, Jesus claims that these legalistic Pharisees will receive the greater condemnation (**Matthew 23:14**). How could such an awful sinner as Simon view himself as not needing much forgiveness? **Matthew 23:25-28** provides the key. One of the natural tendencies of the legalistic mindset is to focus on outward action. The legalist will not think so much about getting the heart right. His lines are about outward conduct and apparent things. Amazingly, because these lines focus on outward conduct, he will not work on his heart as he should. The heart will remain corrupt. Eventually, however, this corrupt heart will result in corrupt actions. But then, he will come up with a system of why his action really was not corrupt and was well within the lines of the law of God, which leads us to our next contrast.

IV. The legalist eventually questions, "Who is Jesus that I should honor and trust Him?"

The lover of God absolutely states, "He is God that I should unquestionably honor and trust Him."

- A. Despite the fact that Simon called Jesus, "Teacher" (**vs. 40, NKJV**) or "Master" (**KJV**), Simon did not trust Jesus. His whole frame of reference was one of doubt. He was looking for a reason not to believe Jesus (**vs. 39**). Then, at the end of this account, we note that those with Simon

(presumably Simon also) questioned who is this who also forgives sins (**vs. 49**)? They did not want to honor Jesus, instead they questioned Him.

- B. The sinful woman however, recognized Him, trusted Him and honored Him. He was the Christ. He was God in the flesh. He was the One who could forgive and would forgive. She loved Him and served Him out of that love. She did not question what she must do to serve. She simply did as much as she possibly could.
- C. This really seems like an odd characteristic of a legalist. You would think of all people, the one who is so concerned about keeping a law would never question the law giver. But that is exactly what happens. When we think through it, we find that the natural end of the legalistic mindset is to distrust Christ and His word. The legalist who is focusing on finding lines, which leads him to believe he is better than others and further leads him to believe he is not much of a sinner, will inevitably come to the point that he views himself and his thoughts as the standard. Rarely will you see this manifest among Christians today as having contempt for Jesus Himself. However, we do find among some Christians contempt for the word of Jesus. You can see this when they question God's word (not questioning to find out what God's word says, but questioning God's word). You will find that the legalist will often say things like, "I know the Bible says this, but ..." "I can see what the passage says, but I just don't think God meant ..." "I read what it says, but I just don't think God would expect this out of us." Notice, with each of these the standard is the legalist's own thoughts. Amazingly, this legalist will even come up with systems by which he seems to justify his own ideas with the Bible. Consider the example of the Pharisees in **Matthew 15:3-9**. God had a law. Honor your father and mother. But the legalistic Pharisees, being their own standard, came up with a way around God's law. They came up with a way that sounded "biblical," that sounded like it was still all about God. All the person had to do was dedicate to God the finances they would have used to support their parents. Do you see what happened in this circumstance? The legalist was his own standard and God's standards would not get in the way. That is the natural end of the legalistic mindset.

V. The legalist will hear, "Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"

The lover of God will hear, "Well done, faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord."

- A. This contrast demonstrates why all of this matters. When the story of Simon and the sinful woman was done, Jesus claimed that the sinful woman's sins were forgiven (**vs. 47-48**). However, He did not say anything about Simon's sins being forgiven. That omission says it all.
- B. Notice the interesting circle Jesus took in this discussion. He began in His story of **vss. 40-43** by saying that this sinful woman loved Him more than Simon because she had been forgiven of so much. But the account ends by saying that she would be forgiven because of how much she loved Jesus. How can it be both? Did she love because she was forgiven, or was she forgiven because she loved?
- C. Or perhaps it was both. She loved Jesus because of the forgiveness He offered. As John said in **I John 4:19**, we love God because He loved us, offering His Son as a sacrifice so we could be forgiven. It is based upon that continued love throughout our lives that God gives us forgiveness. In other words, the recognition of what God has done for us should prompt us to love Him. Loving Him prompts us to be the kind of growing servants we ought to be, which in turn causes us to be forgiven in the end (**II Peter 1:5-11**).

### Conclusion:

The question is, "Which one are we?" Which one am I? Which one are you? Are we legalists or lovers of God? Do we find ourselves trying to draw near to a line we establish as a minimum requirement? Or are we constantly striving for continual growth? Do we think we are pretty good people that God really did not have to forgive much? Or do we live a life of love because we know what truly awful sinners we have been and are compared to Jesus? Do we argue against what God has written? Or do we accept it unquestioningly? Which do you want to hear—depart or enter in? Which one are you—the legalist or the lover of God?