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[Why Join?](#)  
[Officers](#)  
[History](#)  
[Constitution](#)  
[Resolutions](#)  
[Executive Board](#)  
[Regional](#)  
[Moderators](#)  
[State/Country](#)  
[Representatives](#)  
[Meetings](#)  
[Sermons](#)  
[Supporting](#)  
[Churches](#)  
[Contact Us](#)  
[Home](#)  
[Links](#)  
[Publications](#)  
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### Are You a Legalist?

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What Is Lawful?

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READ: Luke 6:1-11

#### Introduction

It is my prayer that our hearts would be pliable and our minds open to principled living that is able to solve the debatable areas. God regards his truth very highly. It is often difficult to find someone who is truly committed to the authority of scripture in their personal life as well as their ecclesiastical. Few are the ones, such as Robert C. Chapman, a dedicated servant of God having lived in 19th century England, who expressed his life's goal in these words: "Seeing that so many preach Christ and so few live Christ, I will aim to live Him." His good friend and pastor said, "He (Chapman) lives what I teach."

It is said of William Arnot who wrote a notable book on the parables of Christ that his preaching was good, his writing was better, and his living, best of all. These men were committed to the authority of the Word of God in their lives. They diligently searched "*Whether those things were so.*" Most of our Lord's truth isn't on the surface to be scraped off by those who casually read the Word of God. We are commanded to "*study [be diligent] to show ourselves approved unto God rightly dividing [cutting it straight] the Word of Truth*" (II Tim. 2:15). Scripture must be "cut straight" in each part for the whole to fit. Scripture is treasure that must be sought for and its value understood. God is not in the business of casting great pearls before swine of holy meat to the dogs. He only gives his truth to those who know its intrinsic value (Matt. 7:6).

In the passage before you, three times we find the phrase, "*Is not lawful*" or "*Is it lawful?*" used. The Pharisees raise the issue initially in verse 2, "*Why do ye that which is not lawful to do. . . ?*" Jesus responds to the Pharisees' accusation in verses 3-4 by using the phrase sarcastically: "If you are condemning me, then why haven't you condemned David who ate the shewbread, which is not lawful to eat but the priests alone?" Finally, as the story climaxes in verses 9-11 Jesus convicts the Pharisees with a piercing question: "As you Pharisees understand the law, is it

lawful to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?"

One of the most important questions in life to answer is "What is lawful?"— What does God allow? Where has God spoken? What criteria do we use where he has not spoken? This is something we confront daily in our Christian lives. Before us we have two clear, distinct approaches. We initially have the Pharisees' approach which is pure legalism; and secondly, we have our Lord's approach which is principled living. Each approach is radically different, and in our churches there are staunch representatives from both groups.

One of the favorite terms of those who disagree with our Fundamentalists' (Biblicists') positions morally, ecclesiastically, and personally is that "You are a legalist." When that term is used, it is seldom given out of kindness, love, or respect. In essence they claim that "your concept of what is right, is wrong! Your putting people under bondage the Word of God does not place them under. If you don't do this, you're not spiritual or right with God." Admittedly, I can see how that can be perceived. Legalism, however, does have a theological and technical definition which is the teaching of salvation by good works.

The Pharisees are perfect examples of true legalism. They thought their laws were coordinate and commensurate with the laws of God; and by adhering to them, you would obtain a righteous standing before God—that's pure legalism. Their offspring became the Judaizers in Galatians who clearly believed that obeying the law would obtain salvation or maintain salvation. They turned the symbols of our faith into the substance of it. Today false religions provide the best illustration of historical legalism. They teach you gain acceptance by God when you maintain a certain set of standards and rules which they have set. Through their law you obtain justification and salvation with God.

In recent years, the term "legalist" crept into fundamentalism with new meaning. Obviously, the prior definition was not intended. They (those who accuse) know better than to accuse Fundamentalists of believing that human works obtain or maintain our salvation. Then what was meant by the term? They are saying, "You are a legalist because you believe that following rules in life constitutes a walk with God." Having grown up in fundamentalism, there is some credence in that.

Legalism, however, is not having rules or standards. There isn't a good church in America that doesn't have rules or standards. In fact, there isn't a bad church in America that doesn't have rules. Even the most broad-minded evangelical church would not allow a lady dressed in a bikini to sing in the choir. Someone might say, "You're a legalist because you teach that a Christian woman shouldn't parade her body immodestly in public." I would never say that a person who doesn't parade their body necessarily has sanctification, is spiritual, or is right with God. Others might say, "You're a legalist because you believe that men should have short hair that clearly demonstrates their gender and distinction." I would never say that a man who has short hair is necessarily spiritual, right with God, or sanctified. If so, the marines would certainly be the most spiritual among us. I'm certain that's not the

case.

Nor is it true that churches who falsely boast of not having standards, rules, or positions are spiritual. Nearly every parent has rules in their home, and certainly every successful parent does. Every school, secular or sacred, has rules. Every government has rules. Every society has rules. Rules cannot equal legalism. Practical (not technical) legalism says "By doing this, you have a walk with God."

Sadly, the debate over legalism rages on, and great confusion exists. Often, we argue the specifics; but don't get to the heart. In fundamentalism, we know the rules, but not the eternal principles underneath; nor can we distinguish them. We know the applications and the interpretations and the standards, but often there exists no principles in the heart to teach us and our offspring when they are away from the rules. What we need are lasting, timeless principles to anchor ourselves and our young when we are away from the "list." Hopefully, when our teens are away from the church and the school, they can ask some basic questions and come up with similar positions. Mostly, "What is lawful?" becomes a matter of approach and attitude. Often, the very people who decry "legalism" in its new form are genuinely legalistic in their approach to scripture and living.

We have heard it said that "most politicians are liars." Rather, most politicians are "unprincipled." By virtue of the election process, many are given to compromise based on the whims of the people. "Men of appeasement" would be a more accurate description. Likewise, when we look at our own lives and remove ourselves from the specifics for a moment, we too may discover that we lack genuine principle in our living.

**PROPOSITION: We need to implement principled living.**

**I. By understanding the perversion of principled living.**

There are four things the Pharisees perverted. Every legalist has a tendency to pervert these same four things.

**A. They perverted the assertion of scripture.**

What does the Bible really say? That is the key question. The Pharisees claim it is not lawful for the disciples to do what they have done. What did they really do? The disciples walked through the corn fields, took some of the left over corn, rubbed the kernels together, and ate them.

This was the second of three confrontations between Christ and the Pharisees. They had been following Christ, watching Him intently that they might catch Him in a fault. In John 5 we have the first confrontation, and in Luke 6:6 we have the third. Here in the second confrontation the Pharisees said, "These men are working on the Sabbath; they are labouring." Note the Pharisees

were not concerned that Jesus' disciples ate someone else's corn. They had the right to eat that corn according to Deuteronomy 23:25 *"When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbor, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbor's standing corn."* (KJV)

The cry of the Pharisees is "It is not lawful; Why do you do that which is not lawful?" The Bible never intended what those Pharisees asserted. The Pharisees were not concerned with what the Bible really said. They are saying that 'We have recorded our application, and you have violated it."

The Jewish religious leadership had 39 separate categories of the law. The law was broken down into 613 separate commandments with as many as 6 subheadings with intricately fine twists and turns. These recordings of their applications are found in the Mishnah and the Talmud. When you read some portions, one wonders how they ever got those things out of scripture. For example, they could find times when it was right to commit adultery under "their law." What the Pharisees were really saying is this: "We place our fine tooth application on the same level as the Word of God." They equated application with scriptural precept.

Some things in scripture are precept which are clear commands which we obey—"Do this or stop doing that." Some things in scripture, however, are principle which are general laws or truths by which we govern our lives—"What you sow, you will reap." Don't confuse the two. There is some freedom in our application of principle. As we mature in Christ so does our application and understanding of Bible principle. Principles never change, but our understanding and application of them does as we grow in Christ. The Pharisees perverted the assertion of scripture. They did not know what it really said.

## **B. They perverted the authority of scripture.**

The question before us and those in this text is "Who is Jesus Christ?" Is he Lord, and does he have the right to dictate in my life?

Luke 6:5 *"And he said unto them, That the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath."* (KJV)

Christ identified himself as the second representative of the race. They didn't like that. Christ drew the title from the book of Daniel where the Son of Man is found in divine form. Jesus tested the true legalists with the question, "Am I really Lord?" He knew the Pharisees disdained all authority but their own.

Legalists are not interested in the lordship of Jesus Christ in their lives and in honoring Him. They, like these Pharisees, are only interested in their own self-preservation. The Pharisees thought

they knew what was right and what was wrong. They didn't even know Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and even had a distaste for His presence.

### **C. They perverted the application of scripture.**

The pious religionists didn't know as much about the Bible as they thought they did. Many who are quick to speak, decrying or promoting their system, fail to see the more critical issue. Neither in the debate really understand the Word of God. Have we taken the time to study to find out what God says? Is there a principle I can follow? Is there a pattern I can imitate? Is there a precedent that will guide me?

Let's go back for a moment to I Sam. 21 where Christ precedents His understanding of the law. David is fleeing for his life from Saul. David and his men who are near exhaustion beg Ahimelech, the priest in charge of the temple, for the holy bread. Ahimelech's response is "All that I have to give you is holy bread set apart in the temple for the priests." David pleads for his life and the lives of his men who were starving and exhausted fleeing from the murderous wrath of a wicked and unjust king.

The priest's response gives us insight to the purpose and method of understanding God's Word: "If the young men are pure (free from women), you can eat." Jesus used this story as a justification for His disciples. What Christ implies here—"Is there a Bible precedent that would allow this. From your vantage point, David violated the law because he ate something which was for the priests alone; but Ahimelech, in his understanding of the law did not violate the law when he gave David the right to eat it. By your standards, David did wrong because you don't understand the application of scripture." Jesus understood the relationship between moral obligation and ceremonial regulation. Christ never confused the symbol of truth with the substance of truth.

The Bible gives principles, but also helps us in our application. Scripture gives us many precedents that we can look to and compare. Scripture also lays down many Godly patterns which we can follow, but you must search and dig for them. There are people who know just enough of the Bible to destroy themselves. They can proof text their own system but don't see the big picture. Jesus had the full scope. For example, talk to the average charismatic; and he can proof text his perversion of scripture with I Cor. 12-14, Acts 2, and the book of Joel. Jesus had the full view in mind.

### **D. They perverted the aim of scripture.**

What is God's intent? In the second half of our text there's a man who needs to be healed. The parallel passage in Matthew mentions that the Pharisees would pull their ox and ass out of a ditch on the Sabbath but limited the rescue of men made in the image of God.

Luke 6:9 *"Then said Jesus unto them, I will ask you one thing; is it lawful on the sabbath days to do good, or to do evil? to save life, or to destroy [it]?"*

Luke 6:10 *"And looking round about upon them all, he said unto the man, Stretch forth thy hand. And he did so: and his hand was restored whole as the other." (KJV)*

Jesus told the Pharisees they perverted the aim of scripture. Do you want to save or destroy? What is the aim of scripture? Jesus answers his own question: to do good and to save life. All the time it is right to do good and to save life. We need to apply that test to our actions.

### **Illustration**

Our youth pastor, Dave Doran, is the son of a lifetime fireman. One day Dave saw an accident outside his home. A man was unconscious in his truck. The truck was burning and had the definite possibility of blowing up, thus burning the man alive. Let's suppose it is time for the Sunday morning service. I believe we ought to be in the House of God when the doors are open. I believe we are commanded to do that, and that the pattern of scripture is that we should meet often. But now we have a conflict. If Dave helps this man, he will be late and probably miss the service. There is someone in desperate need. To leave that man for dead because we are locked into a system void of sense is wrong. We would be more interested in our system than doing good and saving life. Self-preservation would be our only goal and that would be the end of it. Fortunately, at the risk of his own life, Dave Doran saved that man's life. Of course, the Pharisees had no answer for the infinite wisdom of the Son of Man. Instead, they were "filled with madness."

## **II. By Understanding the Performance of Principled Living**

How do I implement principled living in my life? Sometimes I will have the same standards as someone who is not committed to principled living. The difference shows up in the matter of approach and attitude.

I have principles in scripture that I'm going to honestly apply to every area of my life. There are four questions you need to ask yourself when you are making key decisions in your life

### **A. Am I Upholding the Precepts of Scripture?**

You say that you do not want to be a legalist. Are you upholding the precepts of scripture in your daily life? Are you really interested in what the Word of God says? In this regard the "legalist" and the "non-legalist (libertine)" are the same. The legalist says I want to live by "my law" and the libertine wants to live by "my law."

Perhaps, instead of arguing all the applications, how much are you

digesting God's Word? How much are you studying, memorizing, retaining, and living it? When you come to church, how hungry are you to learn; and are you interested in a life saturated by the precepts of the Word of God? The reality is that most want liberty to do their own thing.

Philippians 2:21 *"For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's."* (KJV)

It just might be you would see things differently if you were really in God's Word.

### **B. Am I Upholding the Person of Scripture?**

In other words, are you under the absolute authority of Jesus Christ? If I can look someone in the eye and know they love the Word of God, are under the lordship and authority of Christ, that they worship Him, honor Him, and seek to know Him, then I can get along much easier even if we disagree on the application of principle. Do you want Jesus Christ to govern your life—every area of your life?

Often, the problem isn't the application. We just haven't got to the root. Young person, Mom and Dad, did you rise this morning saying, "Lord, I've a lot of decisions to make today. I want a life that displays surrender to your absolute lordship in everything?"

### **C. Am I Upholding the Pattern of Scripture?**

Some claim we are legalists because we believe our church members ought to attend church on Sunday night and Wednesday night prayer meeting. Let me ask you a question—Are you willing to uphold the pattern of scripture?

Can you envision the apostle Paul sitting home Sunday evenings during church watching Sunday night at the movies saying, "You know I've worked six days this week. I know the Bible will be preached, people will be saved, the music will be stirring, and I will receive spiritual blessing there; but I need to sit back in my easy chair and relax?"

Can you picture the apostle Peter saying, "Weekends are the only time I have to get away. I've got to go fishing on Sunday. This is the only day I have to do it?"

We've got more excuses. We are not interested in being New Testament Christians. As you read the book of Acts, the Epistles of Paul, the writings of John and Peter, you find Godly people who had an appetite for truth, were there on Sunday, all day, and many times everyday because they wanted to uphold the pattern of scripture.

### **D. Am I Upholding the Purpose of Scripture?**

Some think the whole purpose of scripture is self-oriented. They believe being saved sets us free to do our own thing. That is Libertarianism and Antinomianism which means, "no law." They claim to have a right to live as they please and establish for themselves a laissez faire approach to Christianity. "I will live the way I see it" seems to be the underlying principle for their Christian lives.

It is interesting that the book of Judges records no specific laws for the people of God. The reason is that every man did that which was right in his own eyes—"My law."

What is the purpose of God's commands and principles? It is to produce moral change in the lives of those who belong to him. The purpose is to do good and to do right, to emphasize life as opposed to death.

Notice the Pharisees had no answer for our Lord when he put that truth to them. Instead, they just got mad. That's what people do when you live by principled living. Seldom do they say you're unbiblical, you're not under the lordship of Christ, you're not following the pattern of scripture, or you don't understand the purpose of scripture. They just get mad! Is it any wonder that New Evangelicalism seems always to hate those who "Don't love?"

### **III. By Understanding the Product of Principled Living.**

#### **A. Honors Scripture**

Measure a man by the preeminence of scripture in his words and his living. If he holds it high and does not manipulate it for his own purposes, then he is a principled man.

#### **B. Honors the Savior**

Beware of those who minimize the authority of Jesus Christ through false words of personal liberty. Principled men believe in the lordship of Christ over every believer. We are his bondsman, and obedience is our reasonable worship.

#### **C. Honors Service**

Christ emphasized service. He put the mark on doing, not getting. He wants us to reach out to spiritually needy people and do something for God and the world.

### **Conclusion**

"Pastor, What would you do?"

I would uphold the **precepts** of scripture in my life. If the Bible clearly says it's wrong or right, then there is no debate or questioning.



I would uphold the **person** of scripture in this act, Lord Jesus, I will endeavor to uphold your lordship in my life. That will thrust out so much. We cannot say, "I do this questionable activity to bring honor and glory to you."

I would uphold the **pattern** of scripture. Can I find a Biblical precedent for my action? I would ask questions such as, "Would Jesus do it?" or "Would Paul do it?"

I would uphold the **purpose** of scripture. Am I producing real moral change by my actions? Am I saving life or destroying life?