

Looking for Legalism

by Derrick Olliff

<http://beatenbrains.blogspot.com/2006/08/looking-for-legalism.html>

March 2006 (small revision Sept 2006)

Looking for Legalism I: The Sins of Israel

I previously posted a paper on this blog which discussed Paul's letter to the Galatians. In it, I argued that Paul's Judaizing opponents in Galatia were not merit legalists and that Galatians is not an argument against such legalism. Instead, Paul's opponents were more like "hyper-dispensationalists." They wanted the Christian gentiles to become Jews because the Judaizers believed that the old covenants had not been affected at all by the arrival of the Messiah. Paul therefore argued in his letter that circumcision (the Abrahamic covenant) and the law (the Mosaic covenant) had been fulfilled and transformed by the Messiah's arrival. Thus, in this new covenant, the gentiles had been incorporated into God's people apart from the old administrations.

In the next few posts, I want to continue with this theme as it relates to the N.T. history books. I want to look at the Gospels and Acts and see what sort of emphasis, if any, is put on identifying and critiquing merit legalism. The three posts in this series will be as follows:

1. The Sins of Israel
2. The Sins of the Pharisees
3. Some "Surprising" Teaching from Jesus

This post will summarize the sins of Israel in general as they are pointed out in the Gospels and Acts. I will be looking to see how prominent merit legalism is. Not every sin will be listed. In a number of places, Israel or a group of Jews is criticized without a lot of specificity (e.g., Matt. 11:20-24). But I will be looking for discussions of specific sins with an eye toward identifying any examples of legalism.

The next post will focus specifically on the sins of the Pharisees as they are described in the N.T. Since Pharisaism was the most prominent strand of second temple Judaism (2TJ) addressed in the N.T., this should be a good complement to looking at Israel in general. More than a few Protestants think that the heart of Pharisaism was legalism and I want to test that notion. The third post will review a few pericopes where Jesus gave teaching that seems directly related to the topic of legalism.

Before beginning, let me define some terms. Historically, the term 'legalism' has had several definitions. It is often defined as adding requirements to the law that aren't there. Thus, the "house rules" of many American Prots. – don't drink, don't smoke, don't dance – would be legalism by this definition. These are moral requirements that the word of God does not require. They are "traditions of men" that have been added to God's law. I will refer to this form of legalism as "additive legalism" or AL. The other main form of legalism is what I'll call "merit legalism" or ML. This is the idea, belief, or teaching that one can earn/merit salvation from God by doing good works, and this is the type of legalism that I'll be looking for.

These two sins are clearly not the same. For example, one can add requirements to the law without supposing that obedience to such requirements will earn salvation. Maybe such additions are meant to be a hedge which protects people from even getting close to "the line" (and thus significantly lowering the chances that they will cross it). Maybe such additions are meant to make those who do them look good and pious before others. Or maybe those proposing the additions don't think they are additions at all. Maybe they are simply wrong about what the law requires. On the other hand, someone could have a completely accurate view of what the law requires and he could avoid adding to the law but he could still be an ML. He could correctly identify what is and is not sin but he could still think that by following God's law, he is thereby meriting his salvation. Thus, AL and ML are clearly different problems and this difference should be kept in mind.

The Sins of Israel

This isn't going to be fancy. I'll just list the specific and noteworthy sins that were attributed to Israel (or Jews in general without regard for party affiliation) in the N.T. history books followed by some comments.

Matt. 6:1-5, 16

There appears to have been a significant number of “hypocrites” who did pious looking things in order to be seen by and get glory from men.

Matt. 10:5-23

The disciples were persecuted by some in Israel who failed to believe that the “kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Matt. 11:16-19

“This generation” had an inconsistent standard that was impossible to meet. It condemned John and Jesus in a way that was clearly contrived and disingenuous.

Matt. 12:39; 16:4

“This generation” was “adulterous,” a term that reflects OT usage and refers to Israel’s widespread unfaithfulness to the covenant. Israel was married to God (Ezek. 16), and her unfaithfulness to Him is adultery. Idolatry was the most common sin that brought the “adulterous” label.

Matt. 13:53-58

Many in Nazareth did not believe that Jesus was who He said He was.

Matt. 21:23-27

The rulers of Israel challenged and rejected Jesus’ authority.

Matt. 23:37-39

Jerusalem killed the prophets and apostles and she rejected Jesus.

Matt. 26:3, 4; 27:1, 2

The rulers of Israel were active participants in Jesus’ murder.

Matt. 27:15-26; Acts 2:22, 23, 36; 3:12-15

The people in general were guilty of murdering Jesus.

Luke 3:7-9

There were probably those who were covenantally presumptuous. They thought that they were safe from judgment because they were Abraham’s children.

Luke 11:29-32

This “evil generation” tempted God by seeking a sign and it failed to repent at the preaching of Jesus.

Luke 13:10-17

A synagogue ruler hypocritically judged Jesus for something he did himself.

Luke 17:11-19

The nine Jewish lepers were ungrateful after being healed; only the foreigner returned to glorify God.

Luke 17:22-25 cf. John 1:11

“This generation” rejected Jesus.

Luke 19:41-44

Israel “did not know the time of [her] visitation.”

John 5:36-40; 6:64-66; 8:42-47; 9:22-26; 12:37-40

Some Jews did not believe or trust Jesus.

John 5:16-18; 42-47

Some Jews persecuted Jesus; they did not love God or believe Moses.

John 7:14-19

There was a general failure to keep the laws of Moses.

John 8:57-59; 10:31-39

Some Jews rejected Jesus’ Messianic claims and tried to kill Him.

John 12:42, 43

Some rulers loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

Acts 4:1-3; 5:17-20, 40; 6:8-14; 7:54 - 8:3; 12:1-4; 13:49, 50; 14:19; 17:5-9

The apostles and the Church were persecuted; some were killed.

Acts 7:51-53

Israel had murdered Jesus and failed to keep the law.

Acts 13:42-47

Many Jews at Antioch were envious and rejected the gospel message.

Acts 22:17, 18

Many Jews in Jerusalem rejected the teaching that Jesus is the Messiah.

This list is interesting both for what it contains and for what it doesn't contain. This is a more or less complete list of Israel's highlighted sins, and it looks like nearly everything on this list can be summarized and organized under two headings:

Antinomianism – a general failure to be faithful to God, keep the law, and repent when necessary. In some cases, this was probably bolstered by a presumptuous belief that no serious judgment could befall the children of Abraham.

Unbelief regarding the gospel – a rejection of the teaching that Jesus was the promised Messiah-King who had come to redeem Israel and usher in the kingdom of God. This “passive” unbelief often led to more active forms such as persecution and murder of Jesus and His apostles/Church.

It is interesting to note that this list does not contain ML. Now the Pharisees in particular will be discussed in a separate post, so we should keep this post focused on Israel in general. And it is true that the story of the “rich young ruler” is not on this list. For organizational purposes, I will discuss that story in the third post of this series. I realize many would see that story as a great example of ML though I don't think it is such. But for the purposes of this post, even if I grant that it is an example of ML in Israel, it would be a single example involving one person in the midst of a flood of antinomianism and unbelief. So even if this is a good example of ML, it is not significant enough by itself to be a good example of Israel's common, major sins. Israel's “real problem” – that which Jesus and the Gospel writers regularly focused on and pronounced judgment on – was something else.

So the list above contains envy, hypocrisy, and ungratefulness not to mention persecution and murder. In general, antinomianism was quite common. The people were just not following the law. That generation was wicked and adulterous. This was the Israel that Jesus and the Apostles came to, and they were greeted with plenty of unbelief regarding their message and a failure to repent on the part of many Jews. But what we don't see (apart from the possible example of the “rich young ruler”) is the sin of thinking that by following the law, the Jews were earning salvation. In general, the Jews weren't even faithful to the Mosaic covenant (i.e., they weren't following the law). Much less did they think they were meriting something by their works (or non-works in this case).

So in light of the list above, I think the historical books of the N.T. make it clear that Jesus came to an Israel with problems that were very different from widespread ML; He came to an Israel suffering from widespread antinomianism. And then Israel illustrated and magnified the problem by rejecting Him. This shouldn't be a surprise, because this is just what happened throughout the O.T. God didn't regularly send His prophets to His people in order to warn them of their ML. Instead, Israel during O.T. times was regularly falling into antinomianism – apostasy, idolatry, oppression, theft, and on and on. That is what God's messengers warned them of time and time again in the O.T., and this is the state that Israel was once again in when John and Jesus arrived.

In sum, Israel was rebellious, unfaithful, and unrepentant. She failed to remain faithful to God and keep the law, and when the Messiah finally arrived, many in Israel rejected Him. They failed to believe that He was who He said He was and that He would do what He said He would do. This, not ML, was Israel's problem. And therefore this, not ML, was that which would bring judgment. If the Jews did not repent of their unlawfulness (Luke 13:1-5) and recognize/acknowledge “the time of [their] visitation” (Luke 19:41-44 cf. Matt. 23:37, 38), they would perish and their house would be left desolate.

Looking for Legalism II: The Sins of the Pharisees

In part one of this series, I looked at the sins of Israel in general as they are highlighted in the historical books of the N.T. Now I want to focus in on the Pharisees in particular. They are often accused of “legalism,” and keeping in mind the distinction between “additive legalism” and “merit legalism” that I made in part one, I want to explore just what sort of legalism the Pharisees may have been guilty of. But first a caveat.

There were plenty of rebellious Pharisees, but not all of them were ungodly. The core of the Pharisee credo was piety, and there were those who were sincere and faithful to the covenant despite Pharisaical doctrinal errors. One such person invited Jesus to eat with him and the biblical text does not record any hint of hypocrisy or malice on his part. Jesus corrected him, and the Pharisee seems to have accepted the lesson and rebuke (Luke 7:36-48). Some Pharisees warned Jesus that Herod was trying to kill Him (Luke 13:31). The Pharisee Nicodemus came to Jesus’ defense (John 7:45-52), and there were even some who believed in Jesus (John 9:13-16). The book of Acts shows that some Pharisees were open to and respectful of the Apostles’ teaching (Acts 5:33-39; 23:6-9).

However, these Pharisees were probably in the minority. In general, it looks like the party of the Pharisees opposed Jesus and the disciples. This relationship is analogous to the relationship between Israel in general and Jesus. There were more than a few Jews who were faithful to God and who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. But this does not seem to have been true for the majority in Israel. Nevertheless, we should keep the faithful ones in mind when we talk about “unfaithful Israel” or the “hypocritical Pharisees.” These are appropriate generalizations, but there were more than a few faithful exceptions.

Sins of the Pharisees

Similar to the list of Israel’s sins in the first post, here is a list of the sins of the Pharisees as recorded in the N.T. history books.

Matt. 3:7-10

The Pharisees needed fruit worthy of repentance. Some of them were covenantally presumptuous; they thought that significant judgment would not come upon them because they were Abraham’s heirs.

Matt. 5:17-48

Jesus told the people that their righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees. He then gave examples of this by critiquing the Pharisees’ erroneous interpretations of the law. Those interpretations tended to make the law fairly easy to fulfill by ignoring the hard and “weighty” parts/aspects. Jesus opposed that antinomian teaching by teaching the true and full requirements of the law.

Matt. 9:10-13

Pharisees held that one should not eat w/ sinners. This would have been an addition to the law inasmuch as such a thing is not taught in the O.T. They also appear to have been ignorant of their own sin, and this was probably due in part to their antinomian evisceration of the law’s requirements.

Matt. 9:34; 12:24; John 9:13-34

The Pharisees rejected Jesus’ miracles.

Matt. 12:1-14

Two more Pharisaical additions to law: forbidding plucking grain and healing on the Sabbath.

Matt. 15:1-20

The Pharisees added a small command (washing hands) to the law while they ignored the law’s “weighty” requirement to honor one’s parents. They were therefore hypocrites who made a pretense of piety with a man-made command while they neglected the true law. They also appear to have focused on external actions without regard to true motivation, and they “were offended” when Jesus critiqued this formalism.

Matt. 21:18-46

Some Pharisees knew that Jesus’ parables were about them. Those parables pictured a lack of fruit, a lack of faith, disobedience, theft, and murder.

Matt. 22:15-22; 34-40; Luke 11:53, 54

Some Pharisees tried to confound Jesus, make Him look bad, and trap Him into saying something against either Roman or Jewish law.

Mark 3:6

The Pharisees plotted to kill Jesus.

Luke 5:17-25

The Pharisees rejected Jesus' authority.

Luke 7:24-30

The Pharisees rejected the redemptive-historical teaching about John.

Luke 12:1

Jesus warned His disciples to be wary of the leaven (the teaching) of the Pharisees (Matt. 16:5-12), and here we learn that the leaven of the Pharisees was hypocrisy. See Matt. 15:1-20 for a good example.

Luke 16:13-15

At least some Pharisees were lovers of money and liked to justify themselves before men. That is, they liked to make themselves look good and pious before others. They also rejected Jesus' teaching and scoffed at Him.

Luke 18:9-14

Some "trusted in themselves that they were righteous," so Jesus addressed this with a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee thanked God that he was pious and not like overt sinners. But the penitent tax collector was the one who went home justified because those who exalt themselves will be humbled while those who humble themselves will be exalted.

John 3:1-12

The Pharisee Nicodemus was ignorant of some O.T. teaching and he appears to have had trouble believing it.

John 7:25-34; 45-53

The Pharisees rejected the idea that Jesus was the Messiah and tried to have Him arrested.

John 11:45-48

Some priests and Pharisees had an idolatrous attachment to their positions/status and their nation.

John 18:3

Some Pharisees helped to arrest Jesus.

Matt. 23:1-36

Here is the fullest N.T. critique of the Pharisees. In general, they: taught and said things but they didn't do what they said should be done bound burdens on others but didn't place those burdens on themselves did things in order to be seen by men; they exalted themselves before others played games of casuistry with the law in order to avoid its requirements focused on little things and neglected the weightier matters of the law focused on appearance alone; there was no focus on proper desires and motivation even though the law does highlight such things persecuted and killed true prophets

Once again, we can organize and summarize this list into two categories. Like Israel in general, the basic sins of the Pharisees were their antinomianism and their unbelief. However this needs to be qualified and expanded somewhat. The Pharisees' unbelief was straightforward and like that of Israel in general. They simply did not believe that Jesus was who He claimed to be and they did not accept His teaching about the coming of the Kingdom of God. They rejected the idea that He was the Messiah.

But the other major aspect of Pharisaism wasn't just garden variety antinomianism in general. It was rather a combination of legalism with a somewhat reoccurring "flavor" of antinomianism. But the legalism of the Pharisees was not merit legalism (ML). Once again, ML is next to nonexistent in the list above. As with the previous post in this series and the story of the rich young ruler, there is one example listed above that is regularly referred to in order to demonstrate ML among the Pharisees. Luke 18:9-18 shows a Pharisee who "trusted in himself" and was not justified. This, we are told, shows that he was an ML and that since justification is by faith alone, he was not justified.

While I think that this is a somewhat plausible interpretation, I don't think it is the best one. Others have

pointed out for example that the Pharisee was somewhat “Calvinistic” with regard to his good works. He thanked God, not himself, for what he did – for those things that supposedly made him different from other men. That doesn’t sound like any Pelagian I’ve ever heard. And Jesus’ conclusion doesn’t fit the ML interpretation either. Jesus didn’t say that everyone who believes he can merit salvation from God will be humbled. Rather, He said that everyone who “exalts himself” will be humbled. These two are not the same thing. To exalt oneself is to make oneself look good and pious in front of others (generally in order to get praise from others). It is the attempt to say that I am better than you, more faithful than you, etc. And usually this is laden with pride and is done without a view to one’s own shortcomings, weaknesses, sins, etc. The Pharisee was prideful and wanted to exalt himself, but it is far from clear in the story that he thought he was earning justification or something else from God because of his works. He gave God the credit for his works, but he did it in a perverse way, for perverse ends (to make himself look good), and probably with a prideful attitude. Moreover, we should hardly think it impossible that someone could take self-exalting pride in something he views as a gift from God. As Calvinists, we should be rather familiar with such a self-contradiction. So one can hold to the doctrine of sola fide and still have the attitude of this Pharisee.

More could be said to defend this alternate interpretation but I don’t think it is necessary. For once again, this is just one example among many other sins that are regularly highlighted and that are not ML. By itself, this one example simply doesn’t demonstrate at all that Pharisaism was a religion of ML. One example hardly establishes a trend; much less does it identify the heart of Pharisaism. So while I don’t think this story needs to be about ML, my overall view of the Pharisees wouldn’t change even if it were.

So if ML was slim to nonexistent among the Pharisees, what do I mean when I say that Pharisaism was a mix of legalism and a specific “flavor” of antinomianism? The legalism I’m referring to is the “additive” kind defined in the previous post. We are given a number of examples involving Pharisaical “traditions of men.” These sometimes petty requirements were added to the law. But coupled with this, we see numerous examples where the Pharisees downplayed or ignored the actual requirements of the law, and usually these were “big” requirements. Therefore, the picture of the Pharisees that is regularly given in the N.T. is one of petty (gnat-straining) additive legalism (AL) combined with an antinomian rejection of the weightier matters of the law. They didn’t want people plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath, but they were perfectly willing to undermine the commandment to honor father and mother with a sophistic casuistry. And all of this was done while they projected a picture of pietism towards others but it was done without much of an interest in proper desires or motivations (i.e., formalism). There is a term for this: ‘hypocrisy.’ And indeed, Jesus didn’t say that the leaven (i.e., the teaching) of the Pharisees was ML. Rather, he said it was hypocrisy. That, not ML, was their problem.

Thus, we have now surveyed Israel in general and the Pharisees in particular. “The problem” with both can be summarized under two major headings. Israel was antinomian and unbelieving. She didn’t live according to the law and when Jesus came, she rejected Him as the Messiah sent to redeem the nation and usher in the kingdom of God. The problem with the Pharisees was pretty much the same except with a twist. They rejected Jesus as well, but instead of a generic and generalized antinomianism, theirs was a more specific “hypocrisy” – a combination of petty AL and antinomianism done to make themselves look pious but formalistically done without the concern for a truly pious attitude or motivation. And that is why Jesus condemned them. In His most comprehensive critique, he catalogued their leaven and behavior (Matt. 23:1-30) and then He pronounced judgment (Matt. 23:31-36). Those were the sins of the Pharisees.

Looking for Legalism III: Some Surprising Teaching from Jesus

In the search for legalism, we’ve now looked at what the N.T. history books have to say about the sins of Israel in general and the sins of the Pharisees in particular. I think there is one more place we can look to help bolster the results we’ve seen so far.

Imagine that you have recently learned some distressing news. Your Christian friend John has a significant streak of ML in him. He thinks that although he was initially saved and brought to Christ through no effort of his own, he now must contribute to the process in a meritorious way. After reflecting for many months on texts such as Phil. 2:12, he has decided that Christians must “work out [their] own salvation” by doing enough good works to ensure salvation. And right now, he thinks he’s probably done enough good works to merit God’s saving favor.

In such a situation, you would hardly give him the following advice.

“John, I’ve just learned about your new theological views and I’m very concerned. John, don’t you realize that the only people who will live eternally are those who do God’s will? You must keep God’s law if you want

to live with God in glory forever.”

Obviously, that would be a terrible idea. And yet Jesus said things on multiple occasions that, if they were said to a nation struggling with ML, would have been just as counter productive. Consider this statement that Jesus gave to “multitudes” of people. “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” (Matt. 7:21) At this point, He did not stop to qualify this by saying, “Now keep in mind that good works are no cause of salvation but only a necessary consequence. So don’t misunderstand Me to be saying that you can earn your salvation.” He just laid out the statement and proceeded to build on it with similes (Matt. 7:24-27). And when Jesus referred to “these sayings of Mine,” He was referring to what He had just told them – the “sermon on the mount.” And let’s face it, that sermon contains law, law, and more law. But unlike the Lutheran “Law/Gospel” view of how a sermon should be constructed, Jesus didn’t first hit them with the law to make them feel guilty so that He could then follow it up with the comfort of “the gospel.” He told them that He did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it (5:17-19), He corrected the traditional misinterpretations of the law by describing what the law actually required (5:21-48), He gave them some more commands (6:1 - 7:20), and then He summed up and concluded His sermon with those “legalistic” sounding statement and similes (7:21-27). And that was the end of the sermon. Clearly if His audience had held to ML, this sermon would have been a disaster.

Jesus later met a lawyer who asked Him, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25) This may well be THE question of personal soteriology, and we all know what the right answer is. “My friend, you are suffering with far too high a view of yourself. You can do nothing to inherit eternal life, for you are a sinner in God’s sight. All your righteousness is as filthy rags, and there are none who do good, no not one. Therefore you should repent of your sin and believe that Jesus died to take away that sin – something that you could never accomplish.”

We all know that this is the right answer, but this was not Jesus’ answer. Instead, Jesus asked the lawyer what was written in the law. The lawyer quoted the two greatest commandments of the law (Luke 10:27 cf. Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5). Jesus then told him, “You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.” But this was not the end of His surprising teaching. We are told that the lawyer wanted to justify himself, and given the way we tend to turn the word ‘justify’ into a technical, systematic term, we know what our answer to the lawyer would be. “Sir, justification is an act of God’s free grace unto sinners in which He pardons all their sins and accepts and accounts their persons righteous in His sight, not for anything wrought in them or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them and received by faith alone. Stop trying to earn your justification, for that is impossible. Your works will not help you; repent and believe.” But once again, Jesus said nothing of the kind. Instead, He told a parable about a Samaritan who helped his neighbor. The parable had nothing to do with either picturing or critiquing ML. Instead, it helped expose the lawyer’s truncated and racist definition of ‘neighbor.’ Thus, it focused on the lawyer’s real problem: his antinomianism. Jesus then told the lawyer to “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). This means that Jesus twice gave this man “legalistic” sounding advice when the specific question being discussed was “what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus’ answer? Do the greatest commandments in order to live, and here is an example from a Samaritan.

Jesus also discussed these commandments with a scribe. The scribe had asked about the “first commandment of all,” and Jesus responded by quoting the two greatest commandments (Mark 12:28-31). The scribe clearly agreed with Jesus’ answer and praised Him for it. (Mark 12:32, 33). Because of this, Jesus told him that he was “not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). The scribe had simply agreed with Jesus’ identity of the greatest commandments and said that those commandments were more important than the sacrificial system. And for that, Jesus told him that he was not far from the kingdom of God.

Finally, we come to the story of the rich young ruler. The ruler asked what good thing he should do to have eternal life (Matt. 19:16), and we think this shows that he was an ML. But the lawyer above asked the same question, and Jesus answered him by pointing to the law. Once again, this would be a terrible response to give an ML. Yet when the ruler asked this question, Jesus did the same thing. He pointed to the law (Matt. 19:17-19). “But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” Jesus then told him that if he wanted to be perfect, he should sell what he had and give to the poor; “and come, follow Me.” (Matt. 19:21)

If someone came to us with ML, the last thing we would do is let him believe that such a view was true. And yet Jesus did this multiple times when the specific topic of gaining eternal life was on the table. In fact, His answer to the ruler was so alien to our paradigm that we have been forced to argue that Jesus’ answer was something of an ironic ruse. Jesus really believed the opposite of what He said, but He gave the answer He did in order to force the ruler to see that he could not keep the law perfectly. When the ruler saw that, he would then be ready to give up his ML and embrace sola fide.

This would amount to a reductio. Jesus supposedly named laws until He found one that even the ruler realized he couldn't/didn't keep. But the problem here is that on this view, Jesus never got to the point. On this view, the law had already broken the man and made him sorrowful. The final step would then be to give him the gospel alternative. But this final and most important part of the reductio was never given. Jesus let the ruler go away without showing him the orthodox alternative to his supposed ML. And the N.T. gives no indication that Jesus ever talked to the man again. This would mean that Jesus let the man believe that ML was true but that he wasn't good enough. So if this view were true, it amounts to this. A man in the grip of ML asked Jesus a question that presupposed the truth of ML. Jesus answered him by teaching ML not once but twice. Then Jesus let the man go away believing ML was true without telling him the orthodox alternative to ML (and He did this after the man had already been convicted by the law!). This simply doesn't work.

So what is the alternative? It's actually pretty simple. Jesus meant what He said. He wasn't trying to trick the man by telling him to sell his stuff and follow Jesus. He actually wanted the man to do it. This was not a call to abstract moral perfection that was impossible to fulfill. Other disciples had already done exactly what Jesus told the man to do. "Then Peter answered and said to Him, 'See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?'" (Matt. 19:27) And notice that Jesus did not respond by telling Peter that he was deluded to think he had fulfilled such a difficult command. Instead, he accepted Peter's comment and answered his question. "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life." (Matt. 19:29) Peter and the other disciples did just this. They had lives, professions, and sometimes unbelieving families that they left in order to follow Jesus. Thus, Jesus really did want the man to leave his current life and follow Him. He wanted the man to become His disciple.

Remember that this was a time of transition for Israel. Jesus had come to, among other things, harvest the faithful remnant from Israel before judging the wayward nation. Thus, His disciples had to be willing to leave their old lives behind and join Jesus as He brought in the new creation (with Jesus Himself as the first fruits from the dead). Jesus was just requiring the same of this man. Moreover, Jesus' requirement was not something that the Mosaic law required. The law never taught the Jews that they had to sell everything they had. So Jesus wasn't in the process of naming commandments of the law until He found one that even the ruler admitted he couldn't keep. He was requiring something new of the man because of the eschatological nature of the period of time in which he was living. This requirement was not a reductio designed to make the man see his sin. It was a redemptive-historical necessity. Thus, no hermeneutical gymnastics are necessary. In historical context, this text makes perfect sense.

But what about the man's claim that he had kept the commandments? Doesn't this clearly indicate a problem? Not necessarily. Very similar statements are made of Noah (Gen. 6:9), Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5, 6), Simeon (Luke 2:25), and John (Mark 6:20). These people are described as righteous, holy, blameless, and devout. They walked in the commandments of the Lord. There is no reason to think the ruler meant something other than this. The problem here is that we have trained ourselves to view concepts like "law" and "sin" exclusively in the abstract and apart from the covenant. And so we see only two possibilities. Someone is either sinless and morally perfect or he is a law breaker. This perspective is certainly useful and applicable in some situations. It is true enough that all men are sinners and that no man can merit anything from God by his works. But this is not the context for this story. The questions on the table and the point being made are different.

Recall that Zechariah, despite being a sinner, walked blamelessly in all the Lord's commandments. This is not a claim that he didn't sin. Such a statement was possible because the text is not referring to law keeping in the abstract. It is referring to faithfulness within the context of the covenant. And the covenant itself had the sacrificial system whereby sin could be dealt with by faithful people. So when Zechariah (or someone else) sinned, he remained obedient to the commandments by sincerely availing himself of the sacrificial system. And the same was possible for the ruler. Thus, he need not have been claiming abstract moral sinlessness. He was simply claiming the same kind of covenantal faithfulness that we know others had. But the time of transition had come, so Jesus required something in addition to basic faithfulness to the Mosaic covenant. He asked the man to abandon life as he knew it and join the new exodus, because the old world was nearing judgment. Therefore, this story makes perfect sense apart from any references to ML. Jesus doesn't look like a poor teacher, and we don't have to posit strange and implausible accounts in order to rescue Him from error.

So what have we seen in this series? As it turns out, it is very difficult to find merit legalism either described or judged in the recorded history of the N.T. Israel in general was antinomian and unbelieving, and the Pharisees were "hypocritical" (in the sense that we defined it) and unbelieving. The Gospels and Acts point out many specific sins that fall into these general categories, and the curses of the covenant were brought on

Israel because of these things. But there are arguably no (or very few at most) examples of ML in Israel that are presented in the history books, and ML certainly wasn't a problem that was given significant emphasis.

Surprisingly enough, it is much easier to find Jesus teaching what prima facie sounds like ML to us (though it wasn't ML of course) than it is to find Jews teaching or holding to ML. I think that this fact, when combined with the previous posts in this series, really helps finish off the notion that Israel had a significant problem with ML. The basic points are these:

1. There was no significant criticism of Israel or the Pharisees for ML.
2. Israel and the Pharisees were consistently and significantly criticized and judged for other things: antinomianism/hypocrisy and unbelief.
3. The views that sound the most like ML to us came from Jesus, and the N.T. records a number of instances where Jesus taught such views.

Thus, I think the picture is absolutely the opposite of what it should be if ML was a significant problem in Israel. And I think the third point, within the context of the first two points, may well indicate that ML was not even part of Israel's paradigm. Let's face it. We see Jesus' words above and we get nervous. At the very point where we would most expect to see what we think of as "gospel," we see law, law, and more law. So we immediately bring the "analogy of faith" tool out of our tool box (which sometimes appears to get used the way the federal government uses the commerce clause of the Constitution) and we start systematizing. And of course, other Scriptures get hermeneutical priority; these pericopes are interpreted in light of those Scriptures. No wonder Dispensationalists have been known to relegate the sermon on the mount to "the age of law."

We do this because ML is a significant part of our theological paradigm. Obviously it is not significant because we support such a view, but it is significant because it is one of our biggest enemies. In our paradigm, ML is ubiquitous and it is a damnable heresy that we must always be vigilantly on watch for. And of course, there are more than a few Prots. (including Reformed ones) for whom Roman Catholicism (or anything that even smells like it) is THE bete noir. This enemy, with its Trentine merit theology, is a constant threat. The rejection of ML is in fact central to Protestant history in general. Thus, ML is a significant player in our paradigm, and if a Prot. today said some of the things that Jesus said, he would have some splainin' to do. In fact, I have heard talks from Reformed Christians that either included material quite similar to Jesus' words above or that were less easily confused with ML, and those talks have been condemned for supposedly advocating works righteousness, justification by faith plus works, or something similar.

But if ML were not a significant part of a culture's paradigm, then someone could say something in that culture that would sound like ML to us (or at least make us nervous) but not to the original audience. And given the three numbered points above, I think that was the state of first century Israel. Jesus could make those statements and no one would think twice about ML; it simply wasn't a significant part of the first century Jewish zeitgeist. For several thousand years, God had taught His people the importance of following His commandments, but this was done within a general context of grace. The O.T. basically gave Israel this message: "You are an insignificant bunch of rebellious ingrates, but God saved you out of Egypt anyway. And He keeps saving you simply because He is longsuffering and because He made promises. If the Lord marked iniquities, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with Him. So put away your idols, have some gratitude, and do what He tells you to do. Otherwise, He will pummel you with foreign armies. But He loves you and has big plans for you, so trust Him."

In this context, ML wouldn't even be an issue. It simply wasn't a conceivable part of the equation. And so we really don't see much of anything in the way of ML. It just wasn't part of the O.T. paradigm, either pro or con. And when we get to the N.T., the same picture holds. ML is just as insignificant in the recorded history of the N.T. as it was in the O.T. Thus, Jesus could say what He said without being misunderstood by His original audience.