

## **Pharisaism: The Redefinition of Sin**

We each claimed wisdom as our own  
But truth astounds all once it's known  
\_ Imre Madách

The abandonment of the seven deadly sins as a paradigm for understanding the evil that men do has contributed, in the church, to the arrival and predominance of a new Pharisaism. To understand the connection, it is necessary for us to consider a common phrase which is a logical and philosophical contradiction. It is the expression, “religious moralism.”

A modern American dictionary defines “moralism” as “the practice of morality as distinct from religion.”<sup>1</sup> Given this definition, therefore, “religious moralism” cannot involve true religion at all but is moralism incognito. If, however, we plug into this definition the older and once-common meaning of “religion” which equated it with Biblical Christianity,<sup>2</sup> we open a door to understanding Pharisaism. While “religious moralism” is, in one sense, a contradiction, it is, at the same time, a perfect definition of Pharisaism. It is the attempt to establish a standard of conduct apart from the absolute revelation of the Living God.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Living Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language* (Chicago: The English Language Institute of America, 1975), p. 621

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828; San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1980 reprint edition).

The biblical definition of sin is stated clearly by the answer to the fourteenth question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.”<sup>3</sup> Pharisaism begins when men abandon this simple definition and substitute for the law of God some other system for defining right and wrong. When men do this, when they forsake Biblical law as the absolute, immutable standard of righteousness, they necessarily assert moral relativism as the more basic principle of conduct. The result is a complete substitution of standards in which any similarity to the Biblical definition of sin is merely coincidental.

In reality, man is faced with only two alternatives: Either God has revealed to man standards which are absolute in terms of particulars, or man has to decide on his own what constitutes good as opposed to bad. And if man is to decide on his own what constitutes good as opposed to bad, what criteria will he use? Some might suggest that he “look to his soul” which is to say his own conscience or his heart. But, as Jeremiah explains, “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer 17:9). Some suggest eclectic religion, a gathering of the “great common truths of all religions.” But Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (Jn 14:6). In the United States today the common idea is that the collective “wisdom” of the group is the source of standards. But the Bible proclaims God has “made foolish the wisdom of the world” (I Cor 1:20), and that the Christian church is to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God” (II Cor 10:5, NIV). Hence, democracy may have its place in the context of societal

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<sup>3</sup> The Catechism cites I John 3:4, “Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.”

decision-making and in the division of labor, but it has no ability to determine ethical standards. Even in its proper use it must be governed by standards external to itself. Indeed, its decisions will always be based on the morality previously possessed by the participants in the process. There is no neutrality. When men abandon the absolutes of Biblical law, their only alternative is to assert absolutes of their own design.

Pharisaism is the manifestation of a “pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God.” It asserts a code of conduct based primarily on its own observations and its own wisdom. As Jesus told the Pharisees of his own day, “Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition” (Matt 15:6). Pharisaism has salvation as its goal but it is a salvation based upon its own ideas rather than God’s. It is therefore a salvation of works, not of faith. It is rooted in the doctrine that man is capable of demonstrating his own worth before God. In the church, Pharisees hide behind pious assertions of their desire to be “separated from the world.” They presume to prove their piety by rigid adherence to “a few simple rules” while denouncing as “legalism” any attempt to call the church back to the holy law of the Holy God.

Modern Pharisees, like their ancient counterparts, identify an evil, oppose it, and by this expect that they have become virtuous. But, as R.J. Rushdoony has written, “Virtue is not gained merely by opposition to an evil, but rather by positive adherence to righteousness, and, more than that, by Christian faith and its consequent character.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> R.J. Rushdoony, *Politics of Guilt and Pity* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1978), p. 201.

A clear example of applied Pharisaism is prohibition. A commonly held idea is that prohibition failed because “you can’t legislate morality.” This is untrue. Prohibition failed because it was based on a false premise: the idea that evil is located in a substance. In this it was much more closely allied with the ancient religion of Mani and its heretical grandchild, Manichaeism, than with Christianity. Much of the popular support for prohibition was the culmination of nearly one hundred years of activity by a militant temperance movement. These people considered alcohol to be the source and cause of all manner of social evils; neglect of families, prostitution, venereal disease, social and domestic violence, and others. But Jesus, according to Matthew’s account, “called the multitude, and said unto them, ‘Hear, and understand: Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man’” (Matt 15:10, 11). Habitual drunkenness is a *symptom* of rebellion against God; of rebellion against orderliness, against responsibility and, therefore, against true morality and Biblical religion. But the evil lies in the man’s decision to rebel against these things, not in the tool he uses to express his rebellion. Hence, the presumed “moral basis” for prohibition was inherently Pharisaical. Attempting to remove the means of expressing man’s rebellion did nothing to correct the real problem. It is noteworthy that in Matthew’s very next statement, he tells us, “then came his disciples, and said unto him, ‘Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying?’” (vs. 12). Pharisees do not take kindly to having their pretensions demolished.

This kind of pretension prevails both inside and outside the church today. Like the prohibitionists six decades ago, people are coming more and more to believe in salvation

by state decree. It is not uncommon to hear people in churches, including the clergy, voicing support for items of legislation which have no legitimate place in the functions of civil government. This is a logical development of Pharisaism. Having set aside the righteous standards of God for standards of their own design, they then begin to set aside God himself by limiting His influence to the church and the “spiritual” aspects of life. In the civil arena these modern Pharisees have substituted a god of their own making, Hegel’s god-state. But Almighty God, the only true God, whose declarations are binding and eternal, has decreed the limitations of the civil government. The civil magistrate is to administer justice in the land *according to the law of God* so that men may dwell peaceably and securely in godliness and holiness (I Tim 2:2). When men grant to the state illegitimate authority over their own lives and families, they reap a well-deserved harvest of reduced liberty and increased oppression. To quote once again from Rushdoony, “If the state is not restricted to justice, it will relentlessly claim to be the only government of man...”<sup>5</sup>

The alternative to Pharisaism is a whole-hearted return to the proper use of God’s law. Paul, in I Timothy 1:8, says, “we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully.” This includes three aspects. First, the law defines sin for us that we may repent of it and place our faith in the Redeemer. This is called the “schoolmaster” use of the law, the term being derived from Galatians 3:24, “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” Calvin, citing verse 19 of the same passage, “the law was put forward because of transgressions,” argues that God uses the law “in order to humble men, having convinced them of their own condemnation. But

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 144.

because this is the true and only preparation for seeking Christ, all [Paul's] variously expressed teachings well agree. He was disputing with perverse teachers who pretended that we merit righteousness by the works of the law."<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, the law has a civil function, instructing the community as to what behavior is acceptable and what behavior must be punished. Luther, in his 1535 commentary on Galatians, pointed out that, "God hath ordained civil laws, yea all laws to punish transgressions. Every law then is given to restrain sin."<sup>7</sup> Luther made it clear, as St. Paul does both in Galatians and in Romans, that this restraint of sin by law did not produce righteousness in man. On the contrary, the very unrighteousness of men makes the application of law vital to the health of civilization.

The first use, then, of laws is to bridle the wicked. For the devil reigneth throughout the whole world, and enforceth men to all kinds of horrible wickedness. Therefore God hath ordained magistrates, parents, teachers, laws, bonds and all civil ordinances, that, if they can do no more, yet at the least they may bind the devil's hands, that he rage not in his bondslaves after his own lust.<sup>8</sup>

Luther's comments on this point are particularly valuable in that he makes the important connection between the first and second uses of the law. "This civil restraint is very necessary, and appointed of God, as well for public peace as for the preservation of all things, but specially lest the course of the Gospel should be hindered by the tumults and seditions of outrageous men."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this connection is important for our

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<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 volumes (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Vol. 1, p. 351.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Company, 1953), p. 297.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 298.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*.

understanding the value of the Mosaic judicial code. If we accept the biblical definitions of crime, no valid reason can be adduced for rejecting biblical penalties for those convicted of criminal activity, unless specific New Testament legislation can be cited setting such penalties aside. Yet, these are not found. On the contrary, the doctrines of God's justice and God's immutability lead inescapably to the conclusion that the particulars of the Mosaic judicial legislation have abiding civil applicability.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the third lawful use of the law is personal instruction to the believer that he might know with certainty what behavior will please his Maker. Of this, Calvin wrote,

The third and principle use, which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns. For even though they have the law written and engraved upon their hearts by the finger of God, that is, have been so moved and quickened through the directing of the Spirit that they long to obey God, they still profit by the law in two ways.<sup>11</sup>

The first of these was that the believer might understand thoroughly "the nature of the Lord's will."<sup>12</sup> That we need the law for this purpose is seen in that, "no man has heretofore attained to such wisdom as to be unable, from the daily instruction of the law, to make fresh progress toward a purer knowledge of the divine will."<sup>13</sup> The second way the law benefits the believer is that "by frequent meditation upon it" we will be "aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of

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<sup>10</sup> Consider, for example, the implications of Hebrews 2:2, "every transgression and disobedience received a *just* recompense of reward." (Emphasis added). The penal sanctions of the law uphold the righteous character of God and are therefore permanent. See Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1984), Chapter 21 for a thorough development of this argument.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 360.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

transgression.”<sup>14</sup> After citing the Psalms in which David extols the virtues of the law, Calvin writes,

These do not contradict Paul’s statements, which show not what use the law serves for the regenerate, but what it can of itself confer upon man. But here [in the Psalms] the prophet proclaims the great usefulness of the law: the Lord instructs by their reading of it those whom he inwardly instills with a readiness to obey. He lays hold not only of the precepts, but the accompanying promise of grace, which alone sweetens what is bitter. For what would be less lovable than the law if, with importuning and threatening alone, it troubled souls through fear, and distressed them through fright? David especially shows that in the law he apprehended the Mediator, without whom there is no delight or sweetness.<sup>15</sup>

Andrew Harper, in commenting on the failure of the Wellhausen theory to demonstrate a late date for Deuteronomy, nevertheless points to a certain value derived from the critical school’s investigations.

By emphasizing the universal nature of the ten commandments...the critical school [has] cut away the ground from under the semi-antinomian views once so prevalent, and always so popular, with those who call themselves advanced thinkers. It is now no longer possible to maintain that the Decalogue was part of a purely Jewish law, binding only upon Jews and passing away at the advent of Christianity as the ceremonial law did.<sup>16</sup>

Calvin said it well,

Certain ignorant persons not understanding this distinction, rashly cast out the whole of Moses, and bid farewell to the two Tables of the Law. For they think it obviously alien to Christians to hold to a doctrine that contains the “dispensation of death.” Banish this wicked thought from our minds! For Moses has admirably taught that the law, which among sinners can engender nothing but death, ought among the saints to have a better and more excellent use.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Harper, “The Book of Deuteronomy” in *An Exposition of the Bible*, 6 Volumes (Hartford, CT: The S.S. Scranton Co., 1914), vol. 1, p. 512.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 361.

Professor John Murray, in an appendix to his admirable commentary on Romans, discusses the New Testament implications of Leviticus 18:5. He, like Calvin, affirms the importance and usefulness of the Decalogue in the lives of faithful Christians, opposing those who find “legalism” in any application of the commandments to Christian living:

Lev. 18:5 is in a context in which the claims of God upon his redeemed and covenant people are being asserted and urged upon Israel. In this respect, Lev. 18:1-5 is parallel to Exod. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:6-21. The preface is “I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 18:2) and corresponds to the preface to the ten commandments (Exod. 20:2; Deut. 5:6). The whole passage is no more “legalistic” than are the ten commandments. Hence the words “which if a man do, he shall live in them” (v. 5) refers not to the life accruing from doing in a legalistic framework but to the blessing attendant upon obedience in a redemptive and covenant relationship to God. In this respect Lev. 18:1-5 has numerous parallels in the Pentateuch and elsewhere (*cf.* Deut 4:6; 5:32, 33; 11:13-15, 26-28; 28:1-14; Ezek. 20:11, 13). It is the principle expressly enunciated in the fifth commandment (*cf.* Exod. 20:12; Eph. 6:2, 3).<sup>18</sup>

Murray goes on to lay out the distinction between the condemnation of the law and the life of the law:

It must be understood, therefore, that the principle “this do and you shall live” can have no validity in our sinful state as the way of justification and acceptance with God. To aver that it has is to deny the reality of our sin and the necessary provision of the gospel. But we must not suppose that doing the commandments as the way of life has ceased to have any validity or application. To suppose this would be as capital a mistake in its own locus as to propound works-righteousness as the way of justification. We must bear in mind that righteousness and life are never separable. Within the realm of justification by grace through faith there is not only acceptance with God as righteous in the righteousness of Christ but there is also the new life which the believer lives. Paul had unfolded the necessity and character of this new life in [Romans] chapters 6 to 8. The new life is one of righteousness in obedience to the commandments of God (*cf.* 6:13, 14, 16, 17, 22; 8:4). In a word, it is one of obedience (*cf.* 13:8-10). So Paul can say in the most absolute terms, “If ye live after the flesh, ye must die; but if by the Spirit ye put to death the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (8:13). In the realm of grace, therefore, obedience is the way of life. He that does the commandments of God lives in them. It

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<sup>18</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968), p. 249.

could not be otherwise. The fruit of the Spirit is well-pleasing to God and the fruit of the Spirit is obedience. In the renovated realm of saving and sanctifying grace we come back to the combination righteousness – approbation – life. The witness of Scripture to the necessity and actuality of this in the redeemed, covenant life of believers is pervasive. It is this principle that appears in Lev. 18:5 and in the other passages from the Old Testament cited above. “Fear the Lord, and depart from evil: it will be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones” (Prov. 3:7, 8).<sup>19</sup>

It will readily be seen from Calvin’s three uses of the law that the Christian conception of society places the primary responsibility for government at the lowest level – personal self-government under God. Only when this breaks down and results in the perpetration of specific criminal acts by one against another does the civil magistrate have the authority to become involved. It is the Christian mission of the church to call men back to an integrated and systematic concept of God, law and society. Until we do this, Pharisaism will rule the day and oppression will increase until it becomes unbearable.

In his second letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul warned Christians against men who would be “having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof” (II Tim 3:5). The apostolic admonition regarding these men is “from such turn away,” (vs. 5) because they are “lovers of their own selves...despisers of those that are good” (vss. 2, 3). In this they exalt themselves against the knowledge of God, and are acting in rebellion against the very God they profess to follow. The power of godliness is truth. The language of Pharisaism is the language of deceit. It is evil masquerading as morality. Those who truly desire to follow the Lord Jesus Christ must reject the teachings of modern Pharisees as decisively as our Lord rejected those of his day. But the rejection of Pharisaism

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 250-251.

necessarily entails a return to personal responsibility and diligent self-government. Only when the church once again preaches and lives in terms of this concept will the reconstruction of civilization truly begin.