

A legalist is someone who uses the law to honor himself and humble his neighbor. The Pharisees were legalists. As they sat to eat with Jesus on the Sabbath Day, they closely watched Jesus. They were experts in the law, and as experts in the law, they knew that the Sabbath was the day of rest. The law forbade work to be done on the day of rest. They also figured out that healing someone was technically work. They therefore saw the law as a great tool to use against Jesus. If he heals someone, as they know he often did, then he would be working. He would be working on the Sabbath. Then they could nail him. They could show him to be a violator of the Sabbath. They could thereby prove themselves to be the keepers of the law and Jesus to be the breaker of the law.

But the law was not given to us as a tool to honor ourselves and put down others. Quite the contrary! The law is meant to teach me to humble myself and honor my neighbor. Jesus knew the wicked and judgmental thoughts of these experts of the law. But he didn't defend himself. He didn't honor himself. Instead, he simply asked them, "Is it right to heal on a day of rest or not?"

The experts and Pharisees didn't answer him a word. What could they say? If they said that it was right to heal on the Sabbath Day, then they would be giving their approval of Jesus. If they said that it was wrong, then they would reveal themselves to have no love or compassion.

When you try to use the law to honor yourself and humble your neighbor, then you will inevitably fail. Because when you do this, then you are putting yourself under the law's condemnation. These Pharisees and other experts in the law tried to use the law to serve their own purposes. And in doing so, they were silenced by the law.

Jesus knew the wicked thoughts of the Pharisees, because he is God. God searches the heart of man and reveals that it is filled with sin and pride. Jesus saw that he was being dishonored. But he didn't take the opportunity to honor himself. Instead, Jesus focused on what the law required. He allowed himself to be dishonored and unfairly judged. In the meantime, he focused on loving his neighbor. He saw that poor man with dropsy, a terrible disease that makes water fill your body and causes painful swelling all around. He saw that man's need, and he had compassion. He didn't set his eyes on the higher places at the table. Instead, he set his attention on that sick man. He took hold of him, healed him, and sent him away.

It was only after this that Jesus turned his attention back to the Pharisees and experts in the law. Yet, he still didn't make it about himself. He didn't defend himself. Instead, he asked them what was required of them. He asked them if they would pull their son or ox out of a ditch on a Sabbath Day? But they again couldn't answer his question. If they said no, then they would clearly be lying, because no one would neglect immediate emergencies in their own households. If they said yes, then they would have to admit that this man with dropsy was worth more than an ox.

When you try to use the law to exalt yourself and humble your neighbor, then you are putting yourself under the law's condemnation. This is what Jesus warned the guests of that Sabbath dinner against. He noticed that they were trying to get the best seats at the table. They were trying to gain attention and notoriety for themselves. But this would only lead to their humiliation. So he used the setting of that Sabbath dinner to teach them.

Jesus teaches what Solomon taught in his Proverbs, "Don't glorify yourself before a king or stand in the place that belongs to the nobles. It is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put down in front of

the prince whom your eyes have seen” (Prov 25:6-7). Jesus repeats this parable in his own words. But then he adds something to it. Not only should you not take the higher seats of honor. Jesus adds that you should sit in the lowest seat. Take the least important spot. Humble yourself. Not only should you count yourself to be less significant than the guests of honor. Count yourself to be the least significant person there.

This is what the law, if used rightly, teaches us. It teaches us to humble ourselves. It shows us that we are not worthy of any honor, because it reveals the sin dwelling deeply within our natural hearts.

This is the most difficult lesson to learn. It’s impossible for us not to strive for attention. After all, God created us to receive attention. God created man, both male and female, to be in communion with him. He walked with man in the garden, speaking to him, listening to him, attending to and providing for his every need. The man gave attention to his wife, calling her bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. His wife gave attention to him, serving as his helper fit perfectly for him.

As humans made in God’s image, we need attention. God declared, “It is not good for man to be alone.” A little child cries for attention right after leaving his mother’s womb. Because he needs it. He needs to be fed and nurtured. We need this care. So when Jesus teaches us to humble ourselves and be willing to go unnoticed and despised, it is contrary to our own survival instincts.

But our Lord doesn’t leave us without a promise. He says that he who humbles himself will be exalted. He who humbles himself will be honored. By whom? By God! He pays attention to you. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you. He who knows your needs before you can recognize them will himself provide for you. In fact, he already has. He has called you to that one hope, which cannot fade away. Forgiving you of all your sins for Christ’s sake, he gives you an eternal inheritance, which is kept in heaven for you. He sees your sin. He notices how much you have fallen short. But he looks at you through the humble obedience of his Son who died for you, and he declares you righteous.

We naturally need attention. We need father and mother, family, friends, and companions. God provides all of these things for us to support our body and life. But our need for others to notice us and be kind to us is perverted by the sin dwelling in our fallen nature. Need for a spouse is perverted into a lust to satisfy your own carnal desires. Need for friends turns into a desire for worldly praise and popularity. A need for justice turns into a thirst for vengeance. A need for mercy turns into self-pity. So it goes with the sinful mind. It always seeks to benefit itself at the expense of others. If you are constantly trying to hang your hat on how you are not as bad as others, then you are only putting yourself under the law. You are making yourself a slave to your own desires for praise, attention, and honor. And these desires will never be satisfied.

God knows that you need attention. You need the assurance that his eye is always on you, that he doesn’t turn his face away from you because of your sins, but that he continues to lift his countenance upon you for Christ’s sake. If you know this attention from God, then you have peace with him through your Lord Jesus Christ. It therefore doesn’t matter how low your seat is in this earthly life. Because you have the confidence that the Lord himself will exalt you at the proper time. When he sees fit, he will honor you, calling you his friend, and inviting you to come up higher.

The law is meant to humble us, showing us to be no more honorable than the bums and beggars who never got an invitation to the wedding. But the gospel gives us the faith to cling to Christ and honor him

even when we sit in the seats of bums and beggars. You can take the lowest seat, because you have the sure promise that Christ shares his honor with you. He who took the lowest seat, who did not honor himself, who bore our sin in his own body, was raised from the dead, highly exalted by God, and given the name that is above every name. He is the same one who is working in you both to will and do for his good pleasure. He is bearing with you even as you sit in the lowest seat.

Our Lord teaches us to receive his Word with lowly and humble hearts, hearts that are broken by sin, thirsting only for the righteousness of Christ. This is why he gives us his body and blood hidden in these elements of bread and wine. It's why he washes us with a new life by his Spirit hidden in ordinary water. The world doesn't look at these as the places of honor. But Christ's words are heard and treasured by the lowly heart: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved," and "... given ... shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." When you believe these words, you have exactly what they say. You already have the honor of the exalted Christ.

When you find yourself this morning in the lower seat, then you find that those sitting with you are also honored by God. They rely on the same Lord. They confess the same faith. They are joined to the same baptism. They are children of the same Father of our Lord Jesus. They eat the same body and blood of Christ for the same forgiveness of the same sinful heart. So strive to maintain this unity with one another. This is what the gospel gives you. It exalts you even as it also honors your brother. You can therefore bear with one another, forgive one another, and be kind and gentle to one another. Because you will together be exalted at the proper time. Amen.