

Liberals and Pharisees

Several years ago, I preached at a church about 45 minutes away from where I pastor. The folks there learned that I was to preach at another church in the area. “Well,” they said, “that’s not a bad church. But they don’t have very good standards.”

“Really?” I responded.

“Yes,” they went on to explain, “they have mixed swimming activities for their youth group.”

“Oh,” I said, “you’re probably right. I think they do.”

When I went to the second church to preach, they made mention of my having been at the first. “Well,” they said, “that’s a pretty good church, but they don’t have very good standards.”

“Really?” I responded.

“Yes,” they went on to explain, “they allow music that we would not have in our church.”

“Oh,” I said, “you’re probably right.”

It was intriguing to me that each church deemed themselves to be better than the other because of a particular area where their standard of behavior was higher. For the one church having mixed swimming activities was a far more egregious offense but to the other, having music that was not as conservative as theirs was far more significant.

The most interesting thing, though, about the story to me, is not the attitude of the two churches toward each other. You see, I don’t find fault with two of the entities in this illustration. I find fault with three. Because after hearing the response from both churches, I felt that I was the one who was really right because our church neither allowed mixed swimming activities nor used the kind of music in question! Have you noticed that people who have higher standards of behavior than we do are usually, in our mind, Pharisees? We deem them to be silly, excessive, “hyper.” We make call them “ultra-cons.” On the other hand, people whose standards of behavior do not reach up to ours are compromising, liberal. They certainly can’t be right with God and “do the things they do.” Here are a few thoughts about standards of behavior.

□ They are essential. No principle can be widely applied without specific guidelines. The reason we have traffic laws is so that we may drive safely. Underlying all of our laws is the concept of safety. Why then, don’t we just post large, flashing signs on all of our roadways that tell us to “Be Safe!”? Well, one person might think it’s safe to drive 100 mph down I-75 and another might think that 50 mph is the safe speed. Some people will very politely pause at each intersection to give others a chance to go while others will barrel through, assuming that everyone will stop for them. Any honest person must admit that specific guidelines – stop signs, yield signs, speed limit signs and the like – are necessary for us to fulfill our goal of driving safely.

□ They are universal. Those who criticize others for their “stinking standards” have standards of their own, albeit ones which are in their mind, not nearly so malodorous. McDonald’s Restaurants have standards. Have you seen the signs that say, “No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service”? Now, it happens that I can pay for and eat my hamburgers



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equally well without my shirt and shoes on. There is no commercial reason that I must wear a shirt or a pair of shoes when going to their establishment. . . they simply require it. They want a particular level of clothing among their customers. While we may not all have eaten at such restaurants, we know that restaurants exist which do not allow gentlemen to dine there without having a necktie on. Though I do not golf, I was once taken on a golf outing at a very expensive golf course in Palm Desert, California. I wore blue jeans. To my surprise and dismay, I discovered that denim was not allowed on the course! I had to purchase appropriate attire from the pro shop at an exorbitant price. Why, those Pharisees! How dare they tell me how I must dress!

□ They do not demonstrate spirituality. If an ungodly man with shoulder-length hair gets a haircut, he is immediately transformed into . . . an ungodly man with short hair. A harlot who puts on a modest dress becomes a harlot in modest attire. Our young men who join the military are not rendered more godly when their heads are buzzed. It is true that spiritual people, in order to please the Lord, will endeavor to maintain godly standards of behavior, but maintaining the godly standard of behavior is not what makes them spiritual. Their spirituality is determined by their walk with and love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

□ Our attitude toward them is indicative of our heart. While our church would be very much on the conservative side when it comes to standards of behavior, I preach often at churches which may, in one or more areas, not have the same practices as we do. I believe what we do is right; I believe it honors the Lord; I believe I could give Biblical reasons for our behavior. I do not believe that those, who in one area or another, fall short of our standards of behavior, are somehow unspiritual. Sometimes they are uninformed. Sometimes they are new in the faith. Sometimes, for reasons beyond my comprehension. God has dealt with me concerning matters about which He has not dealt with them.

□ They are not the end, but the means to an end. Behind every policy there should be a principle. Behind every principle there is a Person we should be trying to please – the Lord Jesus Christ . . . for what it's worth.