

Pastors,

I am writing you as a concerned Christian who is considering Someplace Baptist Church as a possible church home because of my relationship with Jane Doe, a present member of Someplace Baptist Church (hereafter, SBC). I am presently a member in good standing at Germantown Baptist Chapel and director of Men's Ministry there as well. As I shared with Pastor Todd, Jane and I are considering marriage, and at some point will have to make a decision regarding a church home.

This is why I was pleased in regard to the timing of your Sermon on the Mount series which is an excellent text for demonstrating a church's view of soteriology and other doctrines. In fact, my time investment has greatly favored SBC recently for this reason, and the fact that I already know where my church family stands on these issues. First, grand slams have been hit in the delivery of two messages in this series: Bob's message on divorce, and Todd's message on lust; I communicated to both of you my appreciation on each. Todd's message was an extraordinary, and uncompromising dividing of the word, and I reviewed the message during lunch with Jane and our teenage boys. This testimony is the deep desire of my heart, not criticism.

With all of that said, Todd's message last Sunday morning is cause for great concern, and brings back other concerns regarding Bob's messages in this series as well. However, I do agree with what Todd said in the same aforementioned message; Christians should be transparent without concern for what others think of us. It is in that same spirit that I write this letter, with all hope that it is done in a way that pleases the Lord of truth. I apologize for the length of this letter (four pages), but as you know, this is a complex issue and my concerns span eight messages (less than one page per sermon!). Todd's message delivered last Sunday has raised the most concerns in my mind, and incited this letter; I primarily address my concerns about his message last.

Based on what I have heard in the series so far, I fear that you both have been caught up in the contemporary notion that the church's greatest foe is legalism. This is not true. The greatest foe of the church has always been, and always will be, Antinomianism ("lawlessness"; "without law"; "anti-law"). From the very conception of redemptive history, satan did not come to Eve as a legalist, but rather to cast doubt on the standard that was the basis of God's covenant with Adam and her by saying: "Has God really said?" Toward the end of redemptive history, the antichrist does not come as a legalist, but rather "the lawless one." Paul calls him the "lawless one" (rightfully, "the Antinomian one" as another translation) three times in chapter two of 2Thessalonians. Also, Christ said the latter days would be marked by "lawlessness" (Matthew 24:12), not legalism. In addition, Jesus said Antinomianism will be the direct cause of cold heartedness in the latter days: "And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold." Are we concerned with Christians being cold hearted? Then focus on Antinomianism, not legalism! ***Or, at least give Antinomianism equal time.*** The apostle Paul also said that the "mystery of lawlessness" was already at work in the Apostolic Age and would culminate with a "rebellion" preceding the lawlessness one. Clearly, the devaluing of God's Law is the major concern throughout Scripture, and also the major concern of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. I believe the ESV has Matthew 5:19 right; Jesus' concern was the "relaxing" of the least of all commandments.

Furthermore, I fear that you both have fallen into another contemporary notion as I will state here

following, and propagated by the likes of Francis Chan and others: the supposition that legalism can be an accurate and skillful application of the law for purposes of justification. I suppose one could find the Holy Spirit's concern for this somewhere in Scripture, but not in the Sermon on the Mount, and certainly, this concern is severely overstated by Chan and others when compared to Scripture. Besides, what concern would that be to your Christian audience anyway? They know we are not justified by any kind of works. Unless you think that our own endeavor to please God as Christians by upholding his Law is the same thing as trying to be justified by works, even though we are already justified. That is Chan's position, and it's called "Gospel Sanctification." It is the synthesizing of justification and sanctification which clearly eliminates a role for Law in sanctification, except for its tenet that obedience is imputed to us through the life of Christ. Therefore, since Christ is obeying for us, obedience will be experienced in a certain way; namely, never out of "duty" or displeasure. It also includes lofty speculations that obedience should always be the result of deep appreciation for what Christ did for us via the gospel. Hence (supposedly), the sole focus of the Christian should be a deeper, and deeper understanding / appreciation of the gospel leading to a natural obedience flowing from a grateful heart, as opposed to a focus on exerting our own efforts in applying God's word to our lives. Unfortunately, things being said by both of you during this series is eerily similar to these tenets, especially Todd's comment last Sunday in closing that seemed to ridicule obedience out of duty to God. If he didn't mean to say this should never happen, he wasn't concise on that point.

Further concern on this point is what Bob said concerning the Pharisees in one of the earlier messages of the series. He seemed to say that the Pharisees were proficient at keeping God's Law, but that God's problem with them was the fact that they kept the Law in an attempt to be justified. My concern is that this is the same line held by proponents of Gospel Sanctification concerning their primary definition of legalism, while the biblical definition of legalism is the mixing of man-made traditions with the word of God along with ritualism for the purpose of obtaining justification. This is what the Pharisees were guilty of. Therefore, legalism in the biblical sense is actually a form of Antinomianism because it replaces the word of God (Law) with the traditions of men. Jesus said the Pharisees made the Law of God "void" by their traditions.

The Pharisees were not proficient at keeping the Law, they were horrible at keeping the Law because they changed God's word by mixing it with their own traditions. They also taught that people are saved by ritual (circumcision), and then must sustain their salvation by keeping the Law, but even their definition of the Law was traditions mixed with the truth (Galations 5:2, Matthew 15:3, and especially verse 6). To give Christians the idea that our endeavor to uphold the Law of God is to be like the Pharisees who were supposedly really, really good at keeping the Law; with the result of Jesus being mad at them, is a really, really bad idea, and is also confusing. Moreover, Bob wanted to make it clear in his first message that the beatitudes were not "a New Testament Ten Commandments." This seemed to be, from my perspective, a sort of red herring that made me uncomfortable in regard to the significance of the point. Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount with this line of thought: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." So, anything that can be applied to life that Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount, is in fact, imperative, which would also include the beatitudes. Bob seemed to be making the point from the conception of the series that biblical commands are not a major theme in the Sermon on the Mount. The apparent necessity by Bob to make this point at the beginning of the series makes me uncomfortable because it stands in stark contradiction to the primary concern of Christ in His sermon: "Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these [the commandments in His Sermon; compare with, "these words of mine" in 7:24] commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and

Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” [because they “relaxed” the Law of God by mixing it with their traditions. That is not righteous]. If Christ said that His words in the sermon are commandments, why make it a point to say the beatitudes are not imperative? Though nobody would say it the way Bob did (“a New Testament Ten Commandments”), at least some of the beatitudes are, in fact, imperative. This is clear because Jesus indicted the Pharisees for not having them (Matthew 23:23), and even called some of them the “weightier matters of the Law.”

Yet another important viewpoint on the Pharisees is the idea that their efforts to obey was an outward focus, and such a focus leads to the inside (or heart) being unclean. Therefore, don't be like the Pharisees and emphasize obedience because it is merely an outward consideration. This propagates the idea that Christians should focus solely on the inward, with obedience following naturally (another Gospel Sanctification tenet). Actually, Jesus emphasized both, saying that the issue with the Pharisees was *inward* “lawlessness” (Matthew 23:28). The Pharisees were “lawless” on the inside (ie., thought life, etc.) and outside as well. The intent of Jesus' cup and tomb illustrations were not to say the Pharisees actually kept the Law outwardly, because they didn't, but to emphasize the importance of both.

But as I said, what primary incited this letter is Todd's message of last Sunday morning covering Matthew 6:1-18. It is an example of how the above prisms can detour a rightful dividing of God's word. His first point was: “Do the right thing for the right reasons.” Aside from the fact that Christian obedience with the right motives is an elementary consideration, his first point should elicit the following interpretive question: “What are the right reasons?” The next three points under “The Dangerous Trap” aren't really reasons, but seem to be warnings in regard to the dangers of obedience! The first of the three reflects the idea that obedience can promote pride by inflating our view of ourselves and looking past our sin, or “shortcomings.” Does the Bible ever warn us that Godliness can lead to pride? How can you be Godly and characterized by pride at the same time? Again, this is eerily similar to elements of Gospel Sanctification; such as, the idea that repentance and recognition of sin in our heart must always precede true obedience. The next two points under the same heading addressed motives, which as I said before are elementary considerations.

The next three points are under “Exercising True Obedience.” The first two under this heading do not answer the “what's the right reasons?” question, but that question is finally answered on the third point under this same heading. But I would like to address the first point before looking at the third point that finally answers the interpretive question; specifically, we exercise true obedience by recognizing that “we are *sinner*s saved by grace and respond with love and gratitude to God.” First, “sinners” is a word that regards those who's lives are characterized by sin; that's not us. We are born again, new creatures in Christ who progressively sin less, and less, as we grow spiritually. And when we do sin, it's because we are not “walking in the Spirit” (Galatians 3:16). This seems to be right out of the Gospel Sanctification play book which teaches that true obedience comes from focusing on our sinful condition prior to salvation. Romans 5:8 says: “but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” We are not “sinners” (that's past-tense) who focus on our supposed inability to keep the Law as an effective means to obey; this concept is patently false. It also apes the Gospel Sanctification tenet that believers are still spiritually dead, and being “born again” only pertains to the *living* Christ within us. So then, since we are (supposedly) still spiritually dead as we were before salvation (“sinners”), it is obvious that the living Christ within us is the one who obeys. This is often referred to as the “imputed active obedience of Christ”

At the very least, Todd is implying the same thing regarding our spiritual abilities prior to salvation and applying the same condition to the present. This is what Gospel Sanctification does, it synthesizes

justification and sanctification. Todd also did this toward the end of his message by presenting the prayer of the man in Luke 18:13-15 as a suggested prayer / attitude that cultivates true obedience in believers. But the example is a prayer for salvation, not sanctification. This is clear from the text because Christ said the following: “this man went down to his house justified.” An actual example of a prayer by believers that facilitates obedience is in Ephesians 1:15-23 and Eph. 3:14-21. Are you beginning to see my concerns here?

In regard to the third point that finally answers the interpretive question, Todd said that the right reason (singular rather than plural as stated in his first point) is for the glory of God. Nobody would disagree with that, but Christ makes that point in Matthew 5:16, not the text handled by Todd last Sunday (Matthew 6:1-18). ***In fact, the specific motivation given by Christ to obey in this text is completely excluded by Todd.*** Christ said, as recorded in the text: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. And, “So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.” And, “so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And, “When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.” And, “But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” And, “Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.” And, “so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.”

At least seven times in eighteen verses, Christ speaks of ***rewards***. This obviously constitutes a major theme. So Todd, why did you substitute two other themes that are nowhere to be found in this text? Namely, the motivation to glorify God, and repentant prayer. Prayer is cited by Christ in this text, but not the kind of prayer that you emphasize. Why did you exclude the dominate theme in this body of Scripture? I fear that it is because it does not fit the lofty prism propagated by Antinomians like Francis Chan, who would be horrified at any suggestion that Christ would motivate us through anything but a fluffy, romantic-like love. Todd, as you well know, Jesus is not our boyfriend, He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. I fear that Chan's nonsense has disrupted you excellent ability to exegete Scripture. I also fear this in regard to Bob, who called Chan a “great Christian thinker.” I strongly disagree; I believe he is a shameless, Antinomian hack. Sorry if that is too transparent.

Pastors, with all due respect, the spirit of our age can also be surmised by past and present music. The following song by Jason Gray, which is at the top of the contemporary Christian music charts, has replaced “trust and obey for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey,” with:

“Give me rules, I will break them...show me lines, I will cross them...I need more than a truth to believe...more like falling in love than something to believe in...more like losing my heart than giving my allegiance...give me words, I’ll misuse them...obligations, I’ll misplace them”

Is this what we believe? That some kind of nebulous, fluffy love has replaced our obedience to Christ; our words for Christ; our duty to Christ; the truth of Christ, and even our allegiance to Christ?! I pray not. Whatever happened to “if you love me, keep my commandments”? It's curious, immediately after

that statement, we have the conjunction “and.” Christ then said He was going to send us a “helper.” A “helper” for what? Obviously, to help us love God by following His word. The Bible calls this “walking in the Spirit.” Obedience isn't complicated; we learn God's word and then we apply it to our lives, and the Holy Spirit helps us do so, but He doesn't do it for us. This is how we build our life on a foundation of rock, and that's how Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7: 24-27).

In Christ,
Paul's Passing Thoughts