

Persistent and Deadly “ISMS” – Moralism

“Now, we know that the law is good as long as one uses it correctly.”
(1 Timothy 1:8, Evangelical Heritage Version)

Last month I wrote about the false teaching of *antinomianism*. And as promised in June, this month I’ll be looking at the “ism” which is sort of the other side of the same error laden coin. It’s *moralism*. And I’m again using the words above from the Apostle Paul’s letter to Pastor Timothy in addressing this “ism”— especially the final words in this verse, *“as one uses it [the law] correctly.”*

To begin with, moralism is not necessarily a term that is widely used in Lutheran circles. And it can have more than one definition. In fact, legalism (the false teaching that a sinner can be reconciled to God by keeping His Law) and moralism overlap in various points. My interest is how moralism affects Christianity. So, the meaning I’ll be assigning to moralism is that it is a teaching that sees the Bible as nothing more than a rulebook – the erroneous concept that moral teaching is the only or main teaching of Christianity. And a good number of well-known Americans have stated that they view the Holy Scriptures in this very way. Perhaps one of the better-known proponents of such a view was the third president of the United States and primary author of the Declaration of Independence (a document we remember in particular on the fourth day of this very month). For in the Holy Gospels that he read for his own devotional use, our third president pretty much cut out those parts that referred to the miraculous or referred to the divinity of Jesus – primarily keeping Jesus’ ethical teachings (which he admired greatly) in his compendium of the Four Gospels. This piece of literature is called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, or is more commonly known as *The Jefferson Bible*.

See, like legalism, moralism is also the opposite of antinomianism. For antinomianism sees no purpose or need of the Law in the Christian’s life, while moralism places a high value on the Law and moral teaching. And many in our world today see the Bible and the Christian religion only as a rulebook. And sadly, even some who identify themselves as Christians practice their faith as if the Bible is only about “do’s” & “don’ts” – turning catechesis and preaching into mere moral object lessons.

“But what could be wrong with this?” you might ask. After all, the Ten Commandments certainly tell us what we ought to do and what we ought not to do. But see, if we view the Law of God as the only teaching or as the primary teaching of the Bible, we are missing the main purpose and point of God’s Word. For the problem with moralism is that it leaves the message of Christ crucified and risen in the back seat, if even in the picture at all. Moralism fails to *“[use the law] correctly.”* Oh, I’m confident that some in positions of authority, like parents or workplace managers or government leaders, could find great value in promulgating moralism. But by

ignoring the fullness of God's Law and by also omitting the other great doctrine of the Bible (namely, the Gospel), moralism shows itself to be a dangerous false teaching – even though what it purports sounds right and good, and Scripture passages are sometimes also quoted by those proclaiming moralism.

See, one of the important uses of the Law is to show us our sin – show us our need for forgiveness and deliverance. And this is usually missing in moralism – as is the Good News that God sent His Son to take away our sin and guilt, and to make us right with our Creator. For that is what Jesus did in sacrificing His life into death upon the cross and triumphantly rising again three days later. And through His Gospel in the Word & Sacraments, the Lord delivers the forgiveness, new life, and eternal salvation that His Son earned for us.

My friends, obedience to the moral teaching of God's Law can't give us God's absolution. The Law can't reconcile us with God. God's Law is unable to give us life. So, why would we ever think that moralism is going to save us for eternity? Therefore, in the church, like the Apostle Paul, ***“we preach Christ crucified” (1 Corinthians 1:23, ESV)*** – for ***“there is salvation in no one else” (Acts 4:12, ESV)***.

See, the Biblical truth that we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus alone, grace which is received through God's gift of faith alone, serves as the central teaching of the Bible and therefore of the Christian religion. Moralism's neglect of this truth is what makes moralism so deadly. For omitting the Lord Jesus and His saving work from the Bible changes the meaning and purpose of the Bible. And ignoring or downplaying the full preaching of both the Law and the Gospel turns the message of God's Word into something that is different than what the Bible reveals. For moralism, like any attempt to misuse Holy Scripture, perverts God's Word. And this is deadly – especially when we consider that Jesus, not false teaching or human obedience, is the source of salvation. So, like St. Paul, may God's church and her preachers ***“not shrink from declaring... the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27, ESV)***.

See you at worship to hear God's Law & Gospel,
Pastor