

Lawyers and Burdens

Those who make a living teaching God's law have a responsibility to do it right. If we're not careful, we can make people's lives worse instead of better.

"Then one of the lawyers answered and said to Him, 'Teacher, by saying these things You reproach us also.' And He said, 'Woe to you also, lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers'" (Lk. 11:45-46).



What do you get when you send the Godfather to law school? *An offer you can't understand.* The Jewish people in Jesus' day were all too familiar with that kind of lawyer. And those who make a living studying and teaching God's law today would do well to ponder the occupational hazards associated with that work.

The lawyer in this story was a man whose life was devoted to studying, interpreting, and applying the Law of Moses for the benefit of his fellow Jews. The Law was a civil code that touched every aspect of Jewish life, and the lawyer's job was to help people apply that Law in their lives—in excruciating detail. The lawyers were not the same as the scribes (note that this lawyer saw himself in a third category after the scribes and Pharisees, v. 44). The scribes likely were more involved in the physical transcription of the Law, while the lawyers were concerned with giving legal advice based on the contents of that Law. Whatever the details, the Jewish lawyers were

not much different from modern day lawyers: essential to staying out of trouble with the legal system but consumed by a spirit of censorious legalism.

It's clear from the rebuke administered by Jesus that the way the lawyers handled the Law served not to help the people, but to increase their misery. Their legal pronouncements, consisting of convoluted interpretations of Scripture derived from a deep background of rabbinical studies, laid upon the people "burdens hard to bear." The book that should have been a source of wisdom and encouragement to God's people was turned into a legalistic minefield that entangled even the most honest hearts in contrived transgression. People who were already struggling under a load of hardship and sin in their daily lives (Matt. 9:36) had an extra—and entirely unnecessary—weight of guilt pressed on their shoulders.

The clever legal skills employed by these lawyers not only become a bludgeon that crushed the faithful, they were also useful in extricating themselves from the very burdens they created for others. Just as lawyers today have a reputation for finding loopholes through which they can escape legal jeopardy, so these Jewish lawyers knew how to twist and contort the legalese in such a way as to give themselves an "out." The common people suspected they were being scammed by all this legal mumbo-jumbo, but what could they do? The lawyers controlled all the levers of theological authority, and the ordinary citizen was powerless to push back or question it.

The spirit of these lawyers lives on today. There are numerous preachers and editors who fancy themselves authorities on every issue or question that arises among brethren, and they are not bashful about issuing edicts to keep the faithful in line. Several generations of this theological hair-splitting have created a "burden hard to bear" for the ordinary Christian trying to survive his daily life.

One last lawyer joke: What's the difference between a good lawyer and a great lawyer? A *good* lawyer knows the law, and a *great* lawyer knows the judge. But before you laugh, recognize the nugget of truth hidden in that barb. The job of a conscientious law expert is not to lose people in a maze of legal complexity, but to help them stand before the Lawgiver and Judge with confidence. The gospel is "good news," and those who teach it must take care to deliver a message of hope rather than despair.

— David King