

## On Whittlers and Hedgers

By [Rev. Bill Spanjer, Jr.](#)

It seems that there are two opposite and grievous errors we make when it comes to the commandments of God as Christians. The first is the one I most often see in my high school students, namely that of the "Whittler." The Whittler asks the question with regards to the law, "How far can I go without technically breaking the law." Students will ask of sex for example, "How far is too far?" They know the law of God and that they are not to fornicate or commit adultery, but they wonder just where the limits of those prohibitions exist. Many of us ask the same kinds of questions with regard to things like our taxes. Sure we need to give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but does he really need to know about that money that I made painting my neighbor's garage last summer? It is not that these are inappropriate questions all together. They reveal at their best, a recognition that there are boundaries that need to be observed. However underneath the questions, in many cases, is a perspective which views the law as an annoyance, getting in the way of our happiness. So we whittle away at the demands of the law trying to justify our desires and convince ourselves that almost anything we do is "technically" not breaking the law.

On the other hand there are the "Hedgers." These are the conscientious folks who loathe and fear the Whittlers. They know that the desire to whittle away God's law is in the heart of every man and therefore they attempt to set up safe guards against it. They build hedges, as it were, around the law to protect it from our whittling tendencies. So instead of settling for the law's simple prohibition against adultery, and allowing individual believers the freedom to determine how to avoid breaking it, they establish secondary and tertiary laws to "protect" the weak from disobedience. Not only is adultery wrong then, but so is any sustained physical contact with a member of the opposite sex. But quickly the hedger realizes that if people would whittle away at the law itself, then nothing will stop them from whittling away at the hedge law also. And so they set up another hedge and another. And on and on it goes. Again, the problem is not that there is no wisdom in some of their hedges, but that eventually the hedge laws are elevated to the status of Biblical law with the distinction gradually evaporating.

It might be that many Christians see the flaws in these two approaches, but all of us are inclined toward one or the other and generally we do so with self-justifying disdain for the opposing approach. The Whittlers view the hedgers as Pharisaical and the hedgers view the whittlers as compromisers. Of course both assessments are actually right and therefore both extremes are to be avoided. For, the reality is, as far apart as the two appear, at their roots they both suffer from the same two basic errors.

First, with regards to the law, they both fixate on the letter of the law at the expense of its spirit. The law was not given to be the focus of the Christian's attention, but rather to form the guidelines by which we are directed how to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. Just as the white lines along the side of the highway need to be seen and may, from time to time, as in a dense fog, need to be focused on, typical driving conditions demand that we not fix our gaze on those lines. Rather, we are to keep them in the periphery where they subtly work to help us drive safely with our eyes out ahead of us focused on the coming traffic. In the same way, the law is not meant to be stared at with the desire to see how close we can get without crossing it, or by trying to build artificial barriers to keep us from crossing it. And so, both whittling and hedging ultimately keep our attention off of the very things God's law intends it to be on, namely God and our neighbor.

Secondly, both approaches are driven by self-gratification. The Whittler has his mind on how he can have the sin he really wants in such a way that doesn't "technically" break the law. As such he becomes a lawyer, analyzing all potential loopholes and all the time forgetting the obvious question God would have us ask; not, "What can I get away with here," but "what does it mean to love God and my neighbor here?"

The Hedger on the other hand is obsessed with keeping his hands clean and maintaining a picayune purity that he can be proud of. Yet he often ends up straining gnats and swallowing camels. Jesus dealt with this Pharisaical mindset again and again during his ministry. The Pharisees were highly offended, for example, when he healed on the Sabbath not because it broke any Old Testament law, but because it violated one of their self-imposed hedges to protect them from working on the day of rest. They didn't care that a man had been healed and given liberating rest from the pain and suffering he had been enduring. No, acts of mercy were not to be tolerated on the day of rest. Allow them and before long you will have complete Sabbath mayhem. It was this same destructive and unhealthy demand for self-justifying purity that enabled the priest and the Levite to pass by the man in the ditch while the Samaritan exhibited love of his neighbor, thereby truly keeping the law even while risking ceremonial defilement along the way.

Ultimately both groups, the Whittlers and the Hedgers alike, are pursuing a form of self-justification; one by explaining away the sin and the other by overstating the righteousness. Therefore, we must be on guard to avoid both ends of this perilous spectrum and fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus Christ who neither whittled the commandments of God to allow for the gratification of his temptations, nor needed artificially built hedges to protect him, for his "food and drink was to do the will of His Father who sent Him." Instead, Jesus was driven by a genuine love for God and for his neighbor, forgetting himself and freely obeying.

If we then are to avoid the two errors of whittling and hedging, we must keep our eyes on him as the antidote to either tendency. With eyes firmly fixed on Christ, those with whittling tendencies will find him so beautiful that the siren song of sin which calls us to push the boundaries of God's law will, in time, lose its potency and the law will become a liberating guide rail rather than an annoying barrier to true pleasure. The hedgers on the other hand, will experience the relief of knowing that their justification does not depend on the cleanness of their hands, but on that of Christ's, allowing them to use wisdom in obedience, but without fear or pride. In either case the Christian will finally be free to obey out of a sincere love of God and his neighbor. May God give us the awareness to discern our tendencies and to cast them aside for the glory of finding our identities in Christ.

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