

Edwin Jacques / General

Legalism / Matthew 23:1–34; Jn 15:1–17

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## Purpose

1. Warn the church of the dangers of pride, and how it stands in opposition to the gospel of love.
2. Equip the church to identify legalism so we can keep it from taking root in our lives.
3. Encourage the church that God's love for his people is perfect and unconditional.

## Method

Review Matthew 23 to study what Jesus' beef with the law scribes and Pharisees to understand what legalism is.

Review excerpts from John 14-15 to see how God encourages us to be fruitful while assuring us of His love.

## Matthew 23

### Context

In this passage, Jesus is addressing the crowds with a rebuke of the Scribes and Pharisees.

The **law scribes** that Jesus spoke of was speaking of were experts in Jewish law.

The **Pharisees were** an important Jewish sect at the time of Jesus that was devoted to exact observance of the Jewish religion.

They were highly knowledgeable of the Word of God, and they were

responsible for teaching the Israelites. They were revered by the people. All that is wonderful. God's law is good, the people needed teachers to know what's right, and the people ought to respect them. Some Pharisees like Nicodemus revered Jesus. Remember when Nicodemus came to Jesus in the night and asked incredulously how a man might be *born again*? After Jesus was crucified, Nicodemus provided 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes to prepare Jesus' body for burial – enough spices for the burial of King.

But Jesus had some general problems with the scribes and Pharisees. Let's read about them together.

## The Teacher's Authority

Jesus affirmed the authority of the scribes and Pharisees to teach the word of God, telling the people to respect their words.

Mt 23:1-3 "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice."

However, Jesus warns the people not to do as their teachers do. Ouch.

What were the teachers supposed to be doing? What is the summary of the whole law of God, and the prophets?

Matthew 22:34-40 "But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.""

If you're ever wondering if something is good or right, you don't have to be an amazing biblical theologian — you can simply see how it measures up to these commandments — Love God everything you've got, and love people as you yourself wish to be loved. Let's observe how Jesus applies this when schooling the scribes and Pharisees.

## Heavy Burdens

Matthew 23:4 "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger."

The legalist prioritizes robotic obedience law over people's well-being. One very clear example of that is in Mark 7:8-13 "You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban" ' (that is, given to God)— then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.'"

They didn't care if the mother and father starved, only that what was dedicated to God was give to the Temple.

As Jesus pointed out, this is hardly an isolated example. They had many such practices, which made their application of the word of God cruel.

But why would they do such a thing?

## The Heart of Legalism

Matthew 23:5-12 "They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

**The heart of legalism is pride and self-exaltation.** The legalist wishes to be honored by men at parties, at church and in public. They do this by making sure their practices are conspicuous — like strapping a box with copies of key verses on their forehead. They see themselves as better than others because they are the teachers. The legalist wishes to lift themselves up at others expense. To them, God is a list of rules to be followed.

Jesus admonishes them by reminding them we're all simply men and women under one Father in heaven, and we have one teacher, who is Christ.

## Legalism Impedes the Gospel

Mt 23:13-15 ""But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves."

**The legalist is very interested in fashioning people in their own image. The horrible result of this attitude today distracts the church from fulfilling its purpose of sharing the good news about a God who loves sinners and died to save them.**

Though God alone knows the heart, it's clear that someone who is a legalist can be so deceived and unteachable that they refuse to even receive Christ as their savior. It may not be that extreme though. I think a more likely scenario today is that a church would overemphasize smaller points like arguing about using real wine vs grape juice for communion, and forgetting the duty to proclaim salvation to lost sinners.

## Weightier Matters Forgotten

Mt 23:23-24 ""Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!"

Tithing, that is dedicating a tenth of your income to God was required in Jewish law. Here, we see Jesus upholding that, even for garden herbs. Jesus actually commends the scribes and Pharisees for doing that, but clearly, they missed the heart of God in this practice entirely — justice, mercy and faithfulness.

## External Beauty

Mt 23:25-28 ""Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

The legalists beauty is on the outside. It's all about how they present themselves to others. If you could look into their heart as Christ could, you'd be appalled.

## John 14: Imperfect Love, Perfect Grace

Jesus does ask for our total obedience. It should be clear enough from the greatest commandment, that we love god with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. But, to make the point more directly, we read in the Gospel of John.

| John 15:8-17 (ESV)

| By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. **Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love,** just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

| "This is my commandment, that you **love one another as I have loved you.** Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. **You are my friends if you do what I command you.** No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

I remember as a new believer first encountering this passage and at once being thrilled that

Jesus wants us to abide with Him in love. Yet, I did not fear that he would stop abiding with me if I disobeyed. I took heart in Romans 5:8 "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

You see, there are no conditions placed on God's love for us. He loves us because that is who He is. If we disobey God, that sense of dwelling with God can get lost. We can lose our joy of knowing God — until we confess our sin to God and turn back to him. 1 John 1:9.

Church, we need to be reminded of this continually. It's a lie from the pit of hell to believe that God's love is conditioned on our own obedience. Our sin does not change God. Heb 13:8 "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." AMEN!

## Discerning Legalism: A Checklist.

Discerning legalism can be tricky, because, as Jesus said, they can be quite beautiful on the outside. We want to believe beautiful people. However, there are some red flags that can be helpful so that they don't drag you down.

1. Do they love people more than obedience? Are they doing anything to serve the community or reach out? We know they are Christians by their love.
2. Are they more interested in their traditions than reaching people with the Gospel of Christ? What is on their heart (good treasure or bad?)
3. Do they spend an inordinate amount of time discussing details like:
  1. Work on Sunday – Health care, preachers,
  2. Circumcision
  3. The food we eat... (dietary laws, foodies)
  4. Hymns vs contemporary music?
  5. Communion wine or grape juice?
  6. Silencing women

7. Head coverings for women
  8. Homeschooling
  9. Politics
  10. Whether we should use real wine or grape juice for communion?
4. Do they offer any real help to those who are in need physically, spiritually or emotionally? How about depression? Is every problem a spiritual problem?<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/february-web-only/diana-gruver-companions-darkness-spurgeon-depression.html> Charles Spurgeon: You may be surrounded with all the comforts of life and yet be in wretchedness more gloomy than death if the spirits are depressed. You may have no outward cause whatever for sorrow and yet if the mind is dejected, the brightest sunshine will not relieve your gloom. ... There are times when all our evidences get clouded and all our joys are fled. Though we may still cling to the Cross, yet it is with a desperate grasp.
  5. Do they exclude themselves from other Christians? Do they see themselves as the "real" church?
  6. Do they empower people to understand the Bible for themselves, or simply "pre-digested" teaching to limit contrary thought?
  7. Do they condition the unconditional love of God? Are they constantly questioning if their faith is real.

## Avoiding Legalism

There are a quite a few topics that Christians can needlessly divide themselves over. I'm very glad to say that for us, coming to this church was a breath of fresh air. Finally we could worship God in a place free from the heavy hand of judgement. We avoid needless arguments about disputable matters, like the manner of baptism, and focus our attention on Christ rather than judging one another. This church is such a loving and healing community to be a part of, and I am actually proud to be a part of this church.

That being said, legalism is not something that just "happens", it develops over time. Be on the lookout for pride in all its forms, which can cause us to

argue.

# Communion

## **1 Corinthians 11:23–26 ESV**

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

# Appendix

John 6:28-29 "Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.""

John 14:6 "Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 14:15 ""If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

John 14:21-23 "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him." Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."