

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001

WHY JESUS HATES LEGALISM

Luke 11:37-54

By

Steven J. Cole

April 11, 1999

© Steven J. Cole, 1999

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation

April 11, 1999
Luke Lesson 57

Why Jesus Hates Legalism Luke 11:37-54

There is probably no sin more tolerated or more widespread in the Christian world than legalism. It may surprise you to hear it labeled as sin. Legalists are thought to be a bit overzealous or “up-tight,” but they aren’t usually thought of as sinning in the same sense as adulterers, thieves, liars, and the like. To the contrary, legalists seem to be concerned about holiness.

Yet the Lord Jesus had more conflicts with the legalists of His day than any other group. It wasn’t the adulterers, the robbers and that sort, who put Jesus on the cross. It was the legalists. Later on, the Apostle Paul had the same experience, as the legalists dogged his steps, perverting the gospel of the grace of God.

When you study the life of Christ, it is noteworthy how He deliberately did things to provoke the legalists. He could have healed people on any other day of the week, but He often did it on the Sabbath. He could have been more discreet in violating the Pharisees’ rules, but He did it openly. When a Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner, He could have gone along with their elaborate hand-washing custom, but He deliberately ignored it. When they questioned Him about it, He could have been more polite, but He blasted them for their hypocrisy. When a lawyer pointed out that Jesus had offended them as well, He didn’t say, “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to offend you good folks.” He said, “Woe to you lawyers as well!” Jesus confronted legalism as sin.

And yet many Christian churches today are riddled with legalism, but the pastors are too “nice” to stand up to the legalists and say, “You’re not going to do that in this church!” The evangelical church today is plagued by “niceness.” Somehow we’ve gotten the idea that to be like Jesus means always being nice, never offending anyone, never confronting anyone. But clearly, if we want to be like Jesus, we must confront sin. And, legalism is sin!

What is legalism? Some erroneously confuse it with an emphasis on obedience. I have been accused of being legalistic be-

cause I preach that we must obey God's Word. But every book of the Bible teaches that we must obey God. Being under grace does not mean that we are free to disobey God.

Others say that legalism is when we set up any *manmade* rules. But there are many areas not specifically addressed in the Bible where we need some rules in order to function as a family or church. Parents are not being legalistic when they set a curfew for their kids. Churches are not being legalistic when they follow certain procedures or practices.

So, what is legalism? *Legalism is an attempt to gain favor with God or to impress our fellow man by doing certain things (or avoiding other things), without regard to the condition of our hearts before God.* At the root of legalism is the sin of pride, because the legalist thinks that he is able to commend himself to God by his own good deeds. Invariably, he is only looking at externals, not at his heart. Also, the legalist's pride motivates him to exalt himself in the sight of others by his outward behavior, again neglecting to see the corruption of his own heart. Thus legalism denies human depravity and exalts human ability. As such, it is opposed to the gospel of God's grace. That's why both Jesus and Paul clashed with the legalists.

Jesus hates legalism because it does not deal with
the condition of our hearts before God.

Christianity is primarily a matter of the heart. Everything flows from a heart relationship with God, who transforms our hearts when He regenerates us. The Jewish religious leaders seemingly were seeking after God, but in reality they were self-seeking. They didn't see themselves as sinners in need of a Savior. They saw themselves as good people because they kept the Law. But in reality, they didn't keep the Law because they didn't apply it on the heart level. Thus, Jesus in effect said that if they would be as careful about clean hearts as they were about clean hands, then they would be what they ought to be.

The structure of our text is that in 11:37-41 we have the setting and overall theme, that *legalism puts the emphasis on the external to the neglect of the internal.* Then, in 11:42-44 Jesus pronounces three woes on the Pharisees in which He sets forth some of the specific problems with legalism. At this point, an expert in the Jewish law

speaks up in self-defense, pointing out that Jesus' remarks not only condemn the Pharisees; they also insult the lawyers. Rather than apologizing, Jesus launches into a series of three more woes on the lawyers (11:46-52). The result was not repentance, but rather increased hostility on the part of the Pharisees and lawyers in an attempt to trap Jesus in something He might say (11:53-54).

THE OVERALL THEME: LEGALISM PUTS THE EMPHASIS ON THE EXTERNAL TO THE NEGLECT OF THE INTERNAL (11:37-41).

Before we look specifically at the theme, take note that Jesus accepted social invitations from unbelievers. But, also note that He did not hesitate to confront unbelievers with their sin! He deliberately provoked this confrontation by doing something that surprised His host. But we need to be careful about how we apply this. Jesus was in a cultural context that understood the bold language of the prophets. Also, He is the Lord and as such has both the insight and authority to speak in this manner.

Paul instructs us, "Walk with [NASB, margin] wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should respond to each person" (Col. 4:5, 6). The metaphor of salt implies that we can and should be provocative, but we also must speak in a gracious and sensitive manner. But in every social contact with unbelievers, keep your purpose clear. You're there to be the instrument of the Holy Spirit in convincing the person about sin, righteousness, and judgment, and to proclaim the good news of God's grace in Christ.

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees, ostensibly in an attempt to keep God's Law, had devised and added hundreds of manmade laws. But in so doing, they had shifted the focus from the heart to the outward man. This included elaborate rituals for washing themselves before meals and for cleansing their dishes and utensils. While there was a basis for these practices in the Book of Leviticus (11:33-34; 15:12), the Pharisees had taken them far beyond what God intended. Jesus uses this practice to confront the main issue.

Religion apart from God is always trying to fix the outer man to look good to other men, but it neglects the fact that the Lord looks on the heart. Jesus (11:39) confronted the Pharisees with the

fact that although they went to great lengths to clean their cups and platters, they neglected to cleanse their hearts, which were full of robbery and wickedness. The Pharisees despised those who were openly sinful, but God looks not only at the outward person, but also on the heart. Inwardly, the Pharisees were greedy and wicked. Jesus compares this to washing the outside of a bowl and then eating out of it, even though the inside was filthy! The God who made the outside made the inside as well. Genuine religion is a matter of the heart, not just of external compliance.

The meaning of verse 41 is debated, but Jesus seems to be saying that if we deal with our hearts before God, then everything that flows outward is clean. As J. C. Ryle explains, "Give first the offering of the inward man. Give your heart, your affections, and your will to God, as the first great alms which you bestow, and then all your other actions, proceeding from a right heart, are an acceptable sacrifice, and a clean offering in the sight of God" (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], 3:48-49).

Then Jesus launches into the three woes on the Pharisees:

1. The first woe: Legalism majors on minors and minors on majors (11:42).

The Pharisees were meticulous about giving a tenth to God to the degree that they even tithed their spices! (Rue is a strong-scented herb.) While Jesus upheld the obligation of tithing (Lev. 27:30 was used to support the tithing of spices), He condemned them for neglecting the weighty part of the Law, namely, justice and the love of God. As He elsewhere affirmed, the love of God and the love of neighbor sum up the entire Law (Matt. 22:37-40). But the Pharisees would cleverly tell even their parents that they could not help them financially because their money had been devoted to God (Mark 7:11). Technically, they were tithing, but practically, they were neglecting to love their own parents!

Modern day legalists also major on the minors and minor on the majors. Some churches and Christian parents put major attention on rules about petty issues, such as dress codes or certain activities, but they tolerate serious sins, such as gossip, greed, and pride. If we shun people because of how they look, or over certain

behaviors that, according to the Bible, are not major, we are guilty of the sin of the Pharisees.

For example, you may be surprised to know what Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, G. Campbell Morgan, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and C. S. Lewis all had in common. Yes, they were all godly Christian leaders who were greatly used by God. All except Lewis were gifted Bible expositors and pastors. But also, at least some of the time they were in the ministry, they all smoked!

Many Christians question your salvation if you smoke! I think that if you smoke, you should quit as soon as possible, because it is not good stewardship of your body. The men I just mentioned all lived before that medical evidence was known. But my point is that there are many Christians who are more concerned with getting people to stop smoking than with getting them to walk in the Spirit and stop doing the deeds of the flesh.

2. The second woe: Legalism focuses on self-glory (11:43).

Jesus next condemns the Pharisees because they loved the front seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places. They loved to have people notice how important they were! It made them feel good to be addressed as the Reverend Doctor So-and-so. But pride was at the root of it. They were focused on their own glory, not on God's glory. Pride is at the heart of legalism; humility is at the heart of true Christianity.

The legalist can take pride in himself and his attainments because he is looking at outward matters, not at issues of the heart. He doesn't acknowledge that his heart is just as sinful as the heart of the prostitute or robber. If he had been reared in their circumstances or had encountered the problems in life they had faced, he would have engaged in the same behavior, because he had the same heart of lust and greed. No, he sees himself as a notch above these sinners. He has attained a righteous life by his own hard work and discipline. The legalist is puffed up with pride.

Scripture declares that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (Prov. 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). One sure mark of the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts is that we see ourselves as terrible sinners in the sight of God. We see that we deserve His judgment because of our pride, selfishness, and rebellion.

Rather than comparing ourselves with others and concluding that we are basically good, we compare ourselves with God and conclude that no good thing dwells within us. Thus convicted of our great need, we flee to the cross for mercy. But legalists don't like the message of the cross, because it confronts their pride.

3. The third woe: Legalism subtly corrupts others (11:44).

Jesus compares the Pharisees to concealed tombs. If a Jew came in contact with a tomb or a dead body, he was ceremonially unclean for seven days (Num. 19:11-22). The picture behind these ceremonial laws was that sin leads to death and that the contamination of sin and death spreads to others if it is not dealt with. The Jew who became contaminated by contact with a dead body had to take responsibility for cleansing through the ashes of a red heifer and ritual washing (Num. 19:1-11). Here, Jesus accuses the Pharisees, who were meticulous about such laws of cleanliness, of defiling the Jewish nation through their own spiritual death! The charge must have shocked them!

The application is that the sin of legalism contaminates unsuspecting people. It turns off unbelievers and keeps them from the truth of the gospel, because they can see the hypocrisy of the legalists. It contaminates young believers, who are mistakenly taught that if they do certain things and do not do other things, they will grow in holiness and be pleasing to God. But invariably, the things that they are told to do and not do are not the important issues of the Bible, such as the love of God and neighbor (as summed up in the Ten Commandments). Rather, they are petty things, often things that Scripture does not directly command.

One reason many kids who grow up in Christian homes later reject the faith is that the parents and the church have been shot through with legalism. Instead of the joy of knowing God and of having our sins forgiven through His grace, the focus was on the rules and the outward conformity that had to be maintained so that everyone else would think that the kids (and parents) were good Christians. I'm not saying that Christian homes should not have any rules. But the emphasis in our homes and church should be on the joy of knowing God. As Paul says, "the kingdom of God is ... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17).

At this point, an expert in the Jewish Law who was at the dinner spoke up. Probably he thought that this young rabbi did not grasp the full implication of His words. He was not only indicting the Pharisees; His scathing words also insulted the lawyers and the entire Jewish religious leadership. But rather than apologizing or backing down, Jesus laid into the lawyers with three more woes:

4. The fourth woe: Legalism burdens people with peripheral commandments (11:46).

The lawyers had taken the commands of Scripture and had multiplied them into hundreds of minute adaptations. But, like lawyers in every age, they had also come up with legal loopholes that enabled them to skirt around their own rules, while the average guy was still burdened with them. For example, on the Sabbath the lawyers determined that you could only travel 1,000 yards from your home. But if a rope was tied across the end of the street, the end of the street became his residence and he could go 1,000 yards beyond that. Or, if before the Sabbath a man left at any given point enough food for two meals, that point technically became his residence and he could go 1,000 yards beyond that.

On the Sabbath, you couldn't tie a knot, because that was work. But a woman could tie a knot in her girdle. So if you needed to draw water out of the well on the Sabbath, you couldn't tie a rope to the bucket, but you could tie a woman's girdle to the bucket! (These examples are in William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* [Westminster Press], p. 158.)

The Sabbath laws were given for our benefit, so that we would set aside one day in seven for worship and rest. I believe that modern Christians err by throwing out the entire Sabbath principle. Most Christians treat Sunday just like every other day. But some err by coming up with specific lists of what you can and cannot do on the Lord's Day. The main issue is our heart before God. We are to honor Him one day each week by ceasing from our normal routine and worshipping Him.

Legalism burdens people with peripheral issues and rules. Biblical holiness frees people by pointing them to the beauty of God's holiness and love. As 1 John 5:3 states, "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments

are not burdensome.” When we obey out of a heart of love for God, even though it is not always easy, it will always result in great joy and blessing.

To summarize, Jesus is elaborating on the theme that legalism puts the emphasis on the external to the neglect of the internal. He has shown that it majors on minors, it focuses on self-glory, it subtly corrupts others, and it burdens people with peripheral rules.

5. The fifth woe: Legalism dodges the personal application of God’s holiness, but pretends outwardly to honor it (11:47-51).

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day did not submit their lives personally to the message of the Old Testament prophets, but they built monuments to them to make it look as if they honored them. But Jesus lumps the current leaders with their ancestors who killed the prophets. He is saying that the current leaders are finishing off the job that the earlier generations started. As in all the other woes, the underlying problem is that though outwardly they act as if they honor the prophets, inwardly they do not repent of the very sins which the prophets condemned.

When Jesus refers to the wisdom of God (11:49), He is not quoting any specific Scripture, but rather is summarizing and personifying all of God’s wisdom as revealed through the prophets. Abel was the first man to die because his righteousness convicted his brother of his evil deeds. In the arrangement of the books in the Hebrew Bible, Zechariah was the last prophet to be killed (2 Chron. 24:20-25). Jesus is saying that the blood of all the righteous men who were martyred in the Old Testament would be charged against this current wicked generation, because they rejected God’s revealed wisdom about their sin. This may point to the awful judgment on Jerusalem in A.D. 70 or it may also include the final judgment. The point is, legalists don’t apply God’s holiness to their hearts; they just put on an outward show of honoring it.

6. The sixth woe: Legalism misses the true knowledge of God and misleads those who seek to know Him (11:52).

The key of knowledge refers to the personal knowledge of the living God through His revealed Word. As Jesus said, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus

Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). True religion is a matter of knowing God personally and growing in that relationship with Him. Legalism is a matter of going through rituals and of keeping rules, but it's devoid of the personal knowledge of God.

In many well-meaning but legalistic Christian homes, parents mistakenly think that the way to keep their teenagers in line is to lay down and enforce a lot of rules. But the way to keep your teenagers in line is to lead them to a personal knowledge of the Holy One. He's with them when you cannot be there. If they truly know Him and know the great love of Christ who gave Himself for their sins, they will want to please Him, beginning on the heart level. As our kids grow in their walk with God, we should be able to ease up on the number of rules, not impose more. Our goal is to get each child to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ, in a growing personal relationship with Him. Legalism takes an external approach; biblical Christianity focuses on the heart relationship.

Conclusion

Some years ago, a church in Portland near a college wanted to develop more of a ministry to the students. They weren't sure how to do it, but they tried to make them feel welcome. One Sunday, the church was packed and the service was already underway when a young man with unkempt hair, blue jeans, a T-shirt, and bare feet walked in. He came down the aisle, looking for a seat, but he couldn't find one. Finally, he just sat down on the carpet at the front of the church. It created an uneasy atmosphere in this crowd of people who were mostly dressed in suits and dresses, seated in their rows of pews.

Then, every eye noticed an elderly man in a suit walking slowly toward the young man. Everyone wondered, "Is he going to scold the young man for dressing like that for church? Is he going to ask him to leave?" There was a heavy silence in the church as everyone focused on this scene. Finally, he got down to where the young man was sitting. With some difficulty because of his age, he slowly sat down next to the young man and worshiped there on the carpet with him. (Told by Becky Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World* [IVP], pp. 177-178.) It was a great example of not looking on the outward person or majoring on the minors, but of accepting the person as God does.

Remember, Jesus hates legalism because it does not deal with the condition of our sinful hearts before God. But Jesus loves grace, because it is by His grace that He transforms sinners into saints who love God and who love others.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do Christians tolerate legalism and even see it as a virtue rather than as a serious sin?
2. What warning signals tell us if we're drifting into legalism?
3. Is it hypocrisy or legalism to obey God when we don't feel like it? Why not? Just what is legalism?
4. Should we imitate Jesus in deliberately provoking and confronting people? Consider Col. 4:5-6 and 1 Pet. 3:15 in your answer.

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 1999, All Rights Reserved.