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The Merciless Law of Legalism; Matthew 12:1-14

GPBC

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Introduction – Our text demonstrates how the opposition to Jesus has increased from passive aggression to active entrapment. They are strategically questioning Jesus in order to trick Him into saying or doing something that they can then hold against Him. They are out to discredit Jesus in the eyes of His followers by appealing to their own set of laws and traditions, which they assume are the same as the Law of God. In other words, they are doing right here in ch12 exactly what Jesus said they do in 11:16-17. “Let’s trap Jesus because He is not playing by our rules.”

Even though both of these examples address observing the Sabbath, the lesson here goes beyond the Sabbath to the underlying false doctrine of the Pharisees, which is called legalism.

Legalism is when you add to the Law of God and equate your additions with God’s Law. Legalism occurs when you make practical application of God’s Law and then force everyone else to abide by the application of God’s Law that you have determined. The end result of legalism is the damaging, destructive, gospel-void teaching that declares if you do not obey God’s Law in the same way that I obey God’s Law, then you are not right with God. You are in sin if you do not practice the faith as I practice the faith. You are not even a true believer if you do not follow the same path that I follow. Legalism becomes a heavy burden that Jesus spoke of in 11:28.

We avoid legalism by only requiring what Scripture either prescribes or describes. Scripture prescribes in the 4th commandment that we are to honor the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. That means the Sabbath Day should not look like any other day. The Bible tells us that we set aside the Sabbath Day, we make it holy, by gathering to worship, resting, and doing good when given the opportunity. Anything beyond that falls into the realm of the individual’s own conscience.

The Pharisees had produced a whole list of acceptable and unacceptable actions for the Sabbath. They proceed to confront Jesus with their law as if it is God’s

Law, and He responds by exposing their misunderstanding and misapplying of God's Law.

Legalism is alive today when we rest our salvation in the good things we do and/or the wrong things we avoid doing. Legalism occurs when we look down on others or are looked down upon for not practicing the faith in the same way. Jesus resisted legalism and so must we.

- I. Exposing the Emptiness of Self-Righteous Legalism (vv1-8)
 - a. First Jesus takes them to 2 accounts in the OT to demonstrate how they have grossly misunderstood and misapplied the Law.
 - i. 1 Sam 21. David is fleeing from Saul who means to kill David. He and his men are on the run and are hungry. They arrive at the Tabernacle in Nod and David tells the priest that he is on a mission for the king, and he needs bread. The priest has no common bread, but the Bread of the Presence is available. The Bread of the Presence was 12 loaves of bread set before the Lord representing the 12 tribes of Israel. It was replaced once a week with fresh bread and only the priest were allowed to consume the old bread. (1) David has lied to the priest. (2) He and his men eat the sacred bread, and Scripture is silent as to David acting sinfully or wrongly.
 1. Evidently there is a higher law at work here – the law of life. If the Bread of Presence represented God providing for His people, then David was not acting against God or the Tabernacle or worship when he and his men, God's people, were refreshed with that sacred bread.
 2. There was something greater involved.
 - ii. V5 Jesus refers to the work of the priests that is carried out on the Sabbath even though the Bible says you should rest on the Sabbath. The priests still had to perform the ceremonies and sacrifices. There was some work that had to be done. If the Pharisees were consistent in their demand that no work be pursued whatsoever, then God's people would not even be able to worship on the Sabbath.
 1. Again, there is a higher law at work in the case of the priests – namely, the worship of God by His people.

- b. That is precisely why Jesus makes the next statement. “something greater than the Temple is here.” The first of three points Jesus makes from these 2 OT examples.
 - i. I believe Jesus is referring to Himself. If it is ok in God’s eyes for David and his men to eat the sacred bread because they were on the run for their lives, and if it is ok in God’s eyes for the priests to work on the Sabbath so God’s people can worship, then surely it is ok in God’s eyes for Jesus, the Son of God, and His disciples to pluck and eat grain on the Sabbath when they grow hungry.
 - ii. “Your rules and regulations regarding the Sabbath lay false guilt on the guiltless.” You are not as righteous as you think you are if you label guiltless believers as guilty.
- c. Second point, v7 – “and” If you truly understood the OT, if you truly understood the heart of the Law of God, you would have never asked that question!
 - i. Hosea 6:6 – For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.
 - ii. Micah 6:8 – He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly before your God.
 - iii. Hosea and Micah were confronting the empty worship of their day. People were going through the motions of worship, offering sacrifice after sacrifice, believing that just obeying the sacrificial system made them right with God. But they did not love God in their hearts or honor God with their lives and lips. And God confronted them through the prophets – you’ve missed the point. There is a worship and sacrifice that is meaningless. Legalism is at the heart of it. Jumping through the hoops on Sunday and forgetting Jesus Mon-Sat. Sacrifices are meaningless unless they are presented with a heart of worship and gratitude and humble thankfulness for the grace and salvation and provision of God!
 - iv. Jesus is saying – You’re doing the same thing with your list of rules.
- d. Third point, v8 – I’m not here to follow your rules. I’m here for you to follow me.

- II. How Legalism Actually Nullifies the Law It Claims to Keep (vv9-12)
 - a. You would do good for an animal on the Sabbath, but not for a man who is created in the image of God? Nowhere does God forbid doing good to one another. In fact, the Law comes down to loving God and loving others. Your legalism is actually breaking the purpose and point of the Law – to do good.
 - b. Legalism that claims to keep the Law of God perfectly, actually violates the Law of God in its entirety.
 - i. The Law of God points us to our need for a Savior because we could never keep the Law of God perfectly – legalism prides itself on the ability to save itself by its own rigid, self-keeping.
 - ii. The Law of God provides a guide for life that we may live to the glory of God – legalism boasts in its own law-keeping that it may glorify itself.

- III. How Legalism that Condemns, Condemns Itself (vv13-14)
 - a. V13 – the Law of the Lord lifts people up, legalism weighs people down.
 - b. Note the progression of hardened resistance to Christ. The Pharisees have now moved from passive aggression, to active entrapment, to conspiring to kill Christ.
 - i. That takes us right back to last week’s sermon in 11:20-24. They should repent. They should believe. Jesus has not only shown the error of their interpretation of Scripture by using Scripture, He has also healed a withered hand with just a word! It is absolutely clear He is not just claiming to be the Son of Man; He is the Son of Man. They should repent. They should believe. But they won’t repent. They won’t believe. In fact, they would rather kill Him. Get rid of Him.
 - c. You see legalism that claims to be the chief representative of the ways and will of God actually runs as hard as it can in the opposite direction of the ways and will of God.

Conclusion – In the OT, the Sabbath was the 7th day of the week, Saturday, following the creation model in Genesis 1. For 6 days God worked, then on the 7th, He rested. With the resurrection of Christ on Sunday, the 1st day of the week, the

Sabbath now follows the new creation model of life in Christ. That's why in the NT we begin to see God's people assemble together on the Lord's Day – church means "assembly." Putting all this together – coming to church doesn't make you a Christian – that's the legalist way. But as a Christian, forgiven and saved by Christ, we want to gather, we desire to gather, and worship. Not to gain credit, but to give praise. Not to show off our righteousness, but to glory in His righteousness. Not to win the love of God, but because we have been showered in the love of God. Are you following rules to get to heaven or are you following the Ruler of Heaven and Earth?