

Introduction:

Today, we're going to expose a deadly enemy of the Church. It's a poison that crumbles Christian foundations and has brought many churches to nothing. I want to talk to you about a venom which Jesus Himself exposed and stood firmly against. I want to talk to you about legalism.

Legalists measure spiritual growth against a measuring stick that is notched incrementally by good works. Like the rigid schoolteachers of old, they beat their student's knuckles when they don't measure up. With these human standards, they may conveniently size people up, but in the end, they stunt the growth of their followers instead of encouraging growth. The mark of the legalist is not love but criticism and places human rules over human need.

Legalism is an enemy. It's an enemy in churches today. It was an enemy in the Reformation period. It was an enemy in the days of Peter and Paul. I'm not speaking about some theoretical problem dreamed up in the mind of some preacher; legalism has its roots back even before the time of Jesus. The Pharisees are the grandfathers of legalism, and in our passage today, Jesus meets them in a head-to-head, toe-to-toe confrontation that turns the tide of official opinion against Him.

If we really want to understand what John chapter 5 is saying, then we need to first understand legalism. So, let me answer four questions we will have about legalism:

LEGALISM – LET'S UNDERSTAND IT

A. What is it? Legalism is a fleshly attitude that conforms to a code of behaviour for the purpose of exalting self. Legalists make lists of do's and don'ts not based on Scripture but on tradition or personal preference – then they judge themselves and others on their performance. As we lift the veil on legalism, we find hypocrisy instead of holiness; we see it for the whitewashed tomb it really is (as Jesus described it).

B. How does it happen? Legalism sneaks unnoticed into the church just like a deadly enemy cloaked in pious, religious garb. And when it does, the Bridegroom's party soon grows silent... the wine turns quickly back to water... and joy in the Christian life soon dries up. Legalists prey especially on young, biblically naïve believers (Galatians 2:4).

C. Why is it wrong? First and foremost, legalism is unbiblical. Grace and freedom are the hallmarks of the Christian life, not law and bondage to it. Second, it promotes the flesh – that is, performance – which cannot please God (Rom. 8:8). Third, it is based on pride (Luke 18:9-14). Like the architecturally ornate Corinthian column in the temple where the Pharisee would pray, a proud, erect "I" or "ME" is the pillar that supports legalism.

Law and grace are opposite standards of living. But this does not mean that there was no grace for those who lived under the Law... nor that there are no laws for us, who live under grace. There must be a balanced perspective. Grace never promotes a 'do-as-you-please' philosophy or a loose life of selfishness, sinfulness, and licentiousness. The major differences, however, between living under the Law and living under grace lie with the recipients to the commands and their motivation to obey.

The Israelites received the Mosaic Law and its more than six hundred commands. They were motivated to obey by fear and empowered only by the flesh. Today, believers in Jesus Christ received grace. Although the New Testament also contains hundreds of commands, we are motivated by love and empowered by the Holy Spirit to obey them. It isn't burdensome, but rather our joy to walk in obedience to the grace of Jesus Christ.

D. When did it start? Legalism began in the inter-testament period, was perfected by the Pharisees, and implemented by subsequent generations of apprentices who have been narrow-minded, rigid, and often intolerably religious. Legalists have refused to accept the doctrine of sheer grace. Instead, they have sought to supplement grace with the concoction of their own works.

LEGALISM – LET’S EXAMINE IT

The pivotal issue in John 5:1-18 on which the controversy turns is the question of observing the Sabbath. However, before we get into the passage, let’s do a little digging to uncover the Sabbath’s biblical and traditional roots.

A. Background Information. There are three pieces of history that shed considerable light on the Sabbath and what it means.

1. Origin of the Sabbath: Genesis 1:31-2:2. Sabbath means rest. God rested on the seventh day not because He was tired and pooped, but because He created all He had to for creation. But just as important is that He set us a precedent to follow in terms of our priorities regarding work and rest. But He still holds the world in the palm of His hand; He sustains it. He never ceases to work in the sense that He cares for His creation.

2. Law of the Sabbath: Exodus 20:8-11. To the Jew, the Law of God meant he had to observe the Sabbath every Saturday; on the Sabbath, no one is to be employed but rather to rest their bodies from their usual labour and dedicate it to the Lord.

3. Tradition of the Sabbath: Slipping in between the Old and New Testaments, the Pharisees amplified the Sabbath law by adding thirty-nine categories of unpermitted work, along with a number of tedious restrictions. These became part of the traditional teachings of the rabbis, who then enforce them among the people. Yet, these requirements stretched considerably beyond God’s original intent. For example, in the Mishnah (the Jewish interpretation of the law), notice how obsessive the restriction had become in just this one regulation:

If a man removed his finger-nails by means of his nails or his teeth, and so, too, if he pulled out the hair of his head, or his moustache or his beard; and so, too, if a woman dressed her hair or painted her eyelids or reddened her face – such a one Rabbi Eliezer declares liable to a Sin-offering. (Shab. 10:6)

So much for men biting their nails or women fixing their hair on the way to the synagogue! Jesus never did break the real Law of God; He broke the law of the Pharisees and nothing more, and so they planned His assassination.

B. Biblical Exposition. Now that we understand the Pharisees’ legalistic view of the Sabbath, let’s turn to the story in John 5 that shows how they valued their traditional principles more than people.

1. The Need (vv.1-5): The opening scene is quite sad, even distressing. All around this pool was a sorry sight of various kinds of sick people. They were there because superstition surrounded this pool – it was believed that an angel would stir this water and the first sick person in would be made well. We know since then that it has been discovered that because of a subterranean stream or spring that at times gushes up to the pool and the water would move. But they believed in the superstition though, and so people are gathered up for miles at the pool.

For thirty-eight years, this pathetic, helpless man has laid here in poverty and despair. The man never had a chance to get into the pool first. He was a bruised reed of a man yet within him flickers a small dim wick of hope. It's easy to see the helplessness of the old law in contrast to the new life which is in Christ. The old law could not bring any healing to this man's life, but with only a word, Christ could.

It was just such a bruised reed and dimly burning wicks that Jesus came to help and to heal (Isa. 42:1-3). Just like a child who chooses the runt of a litter of animals with tender compassion, Jesus gives special attention to this withered man.

2. The Miracle (vv. 6-9a): Just as we learned a few weeks ago that distance was no barrier to healing the royal official's son, so time was no obstacle for Jesus to overcome in healing the lame man. Thirty-eight years of misery, shame, embarrassment, and despair... and in a split second, that was all history.

No matter how miserable your life has been – no matter how lame your spiritual life or how long you've been limping – Jesus can change it. The real question is the same as what Jesus asked: *Do you want to get well?*

It's easy to become accustomed to life around the pool of misery. The peer group there certainly won't criticize you. People will make space for your mat and then leave you to yourself – or even commiserate with you.

But maybe, after years of inner poverty, you're looking for a change, longing to be restored to everything God created you to be. If so, Jesus is the ticket out of that slum pool. If you really want to get well, He'll give you the grace and strength to take up your mat and walk.

Can you imagine the excitement of that moment? If you were this man, sick for 38 years, and someone came up to you and said, "Get up and walk!", and you go up and walked for the first time... what would you do immediately afterwards? Would you simply say "thanks, mate" and walk on home? No!! You would be yelling and shouting for joy, and no doubt the crowd would also. But not the legalist!

3. The Confrontation (vv.9b-17): Can you believe the legalists? "What do you think you're doing? This is the Sabbath! Put your mat down get back upon your back. Put that thing down boy!" Can you believe that?

When they should have been on their knees in praise, the only thing these Pharisees can do is pull out their book of rules and quote condemnation, chapter and verse. You don't find one moment where the legalist says, "You got healed? Friend, that is wonderful. To God be all the glory!" Rather, the miracle leaves the legalist bristling with anger, purely because it doesn't conform to their standard of rules and there is no compassion. I thought of this story when thinking of this:

Illustration: A man crashed his plane in the desert. Stranded without water, the unfortunate man trudged through the desert for hours until he could no longer stay on his feet. Then, as he began crawling across the burning sands, he encountered a necktie salesman. "Can I interest you in a nice new tie?" the salesman asked. "Are you serious?" the man gasped. "I'm dying of thirst and you want to sell me a necktie?" The salesman shrugged his shoulders and moved on, and the dying man resumed his crawling. Finally, he came upon an unbelievable sight. There, before his eyes, in the middle of the desert, was a magnificent restaurant with neon lights blazing and a parking lot filled with cars. The desperate man crawled to the front door. With his voice growing weaker and weaker, he said to the doorman, "Please, help me in, I must have something to drink." To which the doorman replied, "Sorry sir, gentlemen are not permitted to entered without a tie."

4. The Reaction (v.18): When the Jews hear of Jesus' escape and His testimony to the healed man, the Pharisees are livid (that literally means black and blue with anger). Essentially, the indictments of the legalists against Jesus were two-fold: one, Jesus broke the Sabbath by performing a healing of a sick man; and two, Jesus claimed equality with God by claiming Him as His Father.

Ironically, the Pharisees were the guilty ones: they judged Jesus, refused to rejoice, or give praise at the healing, and even went so far as to plot Christ's assassination.

LEGALISM – LET'S AVOID IT

Let try to make this message as practical as possible by putting forth three applications. These applications will help us keep legalism from gaining a foothold in our lives and churches:

1. To Expose Legalism, Truth Must Emerge: To expose legalism for the enemy it is, God's word by be exposed more and more – because it is truth. Biblically naïve Christians often fall prey to legalism. When Scripture says, "Do not do it" then you better not do it. That's not legalism – that's truth. When it says, "Do not get drunk", and it says it in many different ways, then we'd better not do it. But that's not legalism – that's truth. When it says, "Do not gossip" then you'd better not gossip. That's not legalism – that's truth! And the truth can never fail, it can only set you free.

2. To Combat Legalism, Conviction Must Be Employed: The only people with whom Jesus was harsh, were the legalists who had all the answers. They were the only ones Jesus had it in for – no one else. When Jesus healed this man on the Sabbath, he took a stand for what was right. He didn't back down on what He did, but did it all with total conviction.

3. To Overcome Legalism, Grace Must Be Embraced: Get a good solid dose of grace. Our works, our attentive duty to them, our exaltation of self, and our ever-increasing pride will never be abandoned until we reach out for God's grace – and as we do, the shackles of legalism will fall from our wrists and ankles. Then and only then will be totally free from this tyrant.

Conclusion

Is God speaking to you in regard to this particular matter? Don't turn it off. God may have given you a set of strict, rigid standards which is for you and your home. That's between you and the Lord – no one should take it away. But that standard doesn't go any further than your property. If Scripture declares it, then that isn't legalism – it's obedience. But if custom or tradition declares it, embrace it if you like, but release all other members of the family from embracing it.

Maybe God is speaking to you now and you're saying, "You know, for the first time in my life I understand what it is to be a child of God. It's not embracing a list of do's and don'ts. It not a matter of keeping the law, performing, achieving perfection, pleasing the next person. It's a matter of pleasing Jesus Christ who gave Himself so that He could liberate us. For God so loved the world that He gave – not a list of rules – but His only Son.

Let's pray.