

February 25, 2018

## “The Trap of Legalism”

Matthew 15:1-20

FCF: Culture of moral starvation and the temptation to lay down rules.

PROPOSITION: (anchor) God has spoken in His Word.

(anchor) We need not and must not fall into the trap of legalism.

### SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

We are a culture suffering from moral starvation. We have no compass and the sails are set in the wrong direction. The statistics are telling. To say nothing of the headlines and stories - corruption, scandals, and shootings. What are we to do? Clearly, there is no consensus.

Some cry, “More laws. Tighter rules.” But is that it? Will it go far enough? Or might it actually make things worse? We are not the first to ask such questions. They are all rather old.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** [Matthew 15:1-20](#)

### PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

### SERMON INTRODUCTION:

We read from Psalm 19. It’s a rich description of the manifold effect of the Word of God in the life of the believer. Psalm 1 says the same ([READ Psalm 1:3](#)). Flourishing fruitfulness. It’s what we have with the Scriptures - a gift beyond assessing, a treasure beyond our weighing.

Yet, despite the value of this gift, there is this ever constant pull towards legalism, an adding to what God has supplied, augmenting what He has given, as though we could somehow improve upon it. Last week we considered the wonder that God, in Christ, can be touched. This week we have both a wonder and a warning. God has spoken in His Word. That’s the wonder. Here’s the warning. We need not and must not fall into the trap of legalism. May we hear both.

To grapple with this, we’re going to look at three things together. First, this case study in legalism. Second, the danger of legalism. And then, third, the one true cure for legalism.

### I. A CASE STUDY

First, this striking case study in legalism set before us in this dramatic exchange.

#### A) *The Parties*

Let’s start with the parties. Who was there and who are they? ([READ Matthew 15:1-2](#))

##### 1. The Pharisees and scribes

The Pharisees were a party within Judaism concerned with a strict adherence to the law. The scribes were scholars and copyists of the sacred texts and were widely regarded as the experts.

##### 2. From Jerusalem

And they hailed from Jerusalem. Meaning this was an official delegation come to investigate.

#### B) *Their Traditions*

What was the concern? Their traditions. Now this is worth unpacking as well.

##### 1. Our traditions

These are not the holiday traditions we have as families, prized but fairly flexible.

##### 2. Their traditions

These are interpretations of the Scriptures handed down over the years. In this case, the washing of hands - not for personal hygiene but ceremonial purity. The law had required the priests to wash before their duties. But the tradition now called for everyone to do this before they ate.

It's a case study in legalism. It starts with teaching on a text and progresses to policies and practices flowing from that teaching. Perhaps all well-intentioned but often troublesome.

*Application:*

We need to see we can fall into the same thing. It can happen over peanut butter. How? The first wave of a mission went into the field. The early years were rough and meant sacrifices. The next wave came. Things were easier now. So much so that they brought luxuries such as peanut butter. The first group found began to look down on the second for their lack of devotion.

We laugh. But that mission fell apart. The same thing can happen over a host of issues. Generations ago, we fought over pool halls and poker. Today, it's approaches to parenting.

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## **II. THE DANGERS**

Which brings us to the dangers of legalism. Jesus says some strong things here, accusing these men of being hypocrites - play actors, pretending to be something they weren't. Why?

*A) Negating the Commands of God*

1. The dynamic

For one, they were negating God's commands (**READ Matthew 15:9**). They had added human traditions to God's commands. Which always has the effect of nullifying God's commands.

2. The example

So Jesus pressed them with an example (**READ Matthew 15:3-6**). They were ignoring the 5th commandment by this gaming of the system with these seemingly pious but fraudulent vows.

It was a crass negation of the commands of God. And the height of arrogance.

*B) Ignoring the State of Our Heart*

But beyond this, they were ignoring the state of their hearts (**READ Matthew 15:8**).

1. Forgetting the purpose of the ceremonial law

They had forgotten the purpose of the ceremonial law, these laws on priestly washings which were intended to impress upon the people the reality of God's holiness and our sinfulness.

2. Focusing upon external acts

They had forgotten this and were focused upon external acts (**READ Matthew 15:10b-11, 16-20**). Their focus was on what holiness looked like. But God wants justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

And this is what made them hypocrites. And worse (**READ Matthew 15:13-14**).

*Application:*

Could it be that bad? Think with me. Such an attitude is rooted in pride and bears the fruit of pride. We create attainable measures and then congratulate ourselves on our efforts. This

then fosters a judgmental spirit. We become self-righteous. After all, we're keeping the rules. Why aren't they? Which then leads to all kinds of division and strife. Which then destroys any witness we could ever have to the watching world. So, yes, it's that bad. And to be condemned.

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### **III. THE CURE**

So what is the cure? I recently came across this quote from R. C. Sproul ([READ quote](#)), "The only antidote to (legalism) is a serious study of the Word of God. Only then will we be properly instructed in what is pleasing and displeasing to God." Is that it? Actually, it is.

#### *A) The Mirror*

##### 1. Reflecting God's righteousness

For the Word of God works like a mirror, reflecting God's righteousness, His perfect character.

##### 2. Revealing our sinfulness

It is a mirror reflecting His righteousness, revealing our sinfulness, making clear our need. Legalism puffs us up and keeps us from Christ. God's Word humbles us and drives us to Christ.

#### *B) The Map*

It works as a mirror. And once the Word has done that, it then becomes a map.

##### 1. To guide our thanks

That is, it guides a life of thanks to God, showing us how He wants us to respond to His love.

##### 2. To guide our steps

It guides our thanks. And then it guides our steps, showing us what true wisdom looks like, how we were made to live as the Master's servants and the Father's children in this world.

So, Sproul was right. The cure for legalism is a serious study of the Word of God.

#### *Application:*

Which has an expulsive power to it. We taste of the banquet of the Scriptures - its richness and beauty and wonder - and we simply lose our taste for the junk food of legalism.

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### **CONCLUSION:**

Billy Graham's passing has marked the end of an era. He was the pastor to presidents, the preacher to millions, holding fast to the end. He's been described as the most influential Christian of the 20th century. His ministry was so wide-ranging and long-lasting. A legacy that will, no doubt, carry on for generations. Why? Many are asking that question. How could it be that a kid from a dairy farm in Charlotte, NC could leave such a mark? There are a lot of factors but one has to be that he stayed on message. He stayed on message and this is a message that transcends trends and cultures. Which led to this wide-ranging and long-lasting ministry.

It's like that here in our text. We simply need to let the Word speak. We must not think so much of ourselves that we would then add to or take away from it. But rather, we need to

trust God, let it speak, and stay on message. Again - basic and fundamental as this may sound - God has spoken to us in His Word. We need not and must not fall into the trap of legalism.

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