

Luke 11:37-54 (1984 NIV)
Law Keeper or God Lover?

Introduction

When you study the life of Christ, it is interesting to notice how He deliberately did things to provoke some of the religious legalists in His time. E.g. He could have healed people on any other day of the week, but He chose to do it on the Sabbath. Even then, He could have been more discreet, but He did it publicly.

In Luke 11:14ff, we read of our Lord driving out a demon from a mute man who thereafter was able to speak. We also read of how He indirectly charged the Pharisees and teachers of the Law for being spiritually unrepentant and blind. These religious leaders were among the crowd watching His works and hearing His words.

Our text begins with a Pharisee who invited Jesus to a meal at his home. He had some questions to ask or even challenge Jesus after watching and hearing Him. But he didn't want to do it publicly when he was among the crowd. So he invited Jesus to eat at his home, together with other Pharisees and teachers of the Law.

Jesus could have gone along with the elaborate hand-washing custom before the meal. But He deliberately ignored it. When He was questioned about it, He could have been more polite. But He responded quite bluntly indeed.

When a lawyer (teacher and interpreter of the Old Testament Law) pointed out that Jesus had offended them, He could have said, "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to offend you good folks." But He said, "Woe to you lawyers as well!"

Wow! How would you like to have such a guest in your house? They told Him, "Welcome. Make yourself at home." And Jesus really made Himself at home with His rather provoking remarks.

In our text today, Jesus corrected the Pharisees not because they observed the law, but because they practised legalism.

Let's consider why legalism displeases the Lord. But let's first ask ...

I. What legalism is (vv. 39-41)

37 When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table.

38 But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal.

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39 Then the Lord said to him, “Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness.

40 You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?

41 But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you.”

Some mistakenly confuse legalism with an emphasis on obedience. E.g. I may be accused of being legalistic if I keep preaching that we **MUST** obey God’s Word. To some people, being under grace means you are free ... free even to disobey God. So, there is no such a thing as **MUST** because we are **FREE** to choose.

Legalism is also equated with the setting up of man-made rules. There are many areas not specifically addressed in the Bible, but where we need some rules in order to function as a family or church. I mean a father is not being legalistic when he sets a reasonable rule for his young son—e.g. no more computer time after a certain time in the evening. A church is not being legalistic when it prescribes certain procedures or practices for good stewardship and governance.

So, what is legalism? Legalism is an attempt to gain favour with God or to impress others by doing/avoiding certain things without regard to the real heart condition before God.

The legalist wants to commend himself to God by his seemingly good deeds. He is only looking at externals, not at his heart. Also, the legalist wants to exalt himself in the sight of others by his outward behaviour, again neglecting to see the corruption of his own heart. Thus, legalism denies human depravity (i.e. we can do nothing on our own to merit God’s favour). But it exalts human ability (i.e. we can do things on our own to merit God’s favour). As such, it is opposed to the Gospel of God’s grace. That’s why Jesus clashed with the legalists.

In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees had devised and added hundreds of man-made laws in an attempt to keep God’s Law. Though they might have good intentions, 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 Old Testament (e.g. Lev. 11:33-34; 15:12), the Pharisees had taken them far beyond what God intended.

Religion apart from God is always trying to fix the outer man to look good to others. But it neglects the fact that the Lord looks at the heart. Jesus corrected the Pharisees with the fact that although they went to great lengths to clean their cups and plates, they neglected to cleanse their hearts. Jesus

compared this to washing just the outside of a bowl and then eating out of it, even though the inside was still filthy!

R. C. Sproul: “Legalism is concerned simply with external conformity and is blind to internal motivation.”¹

Sam Storms: “Legalism is the tendency to regard as divine law things which God has neither required nor forbidden in Scripture and the corresponding inclination to look with suspicion on others for their failure or refusal to conform.”²

Christianity is primarily a matter of the heart. Everything flows from a heart relationship with God. The Jewish religious leaders whom Jesus corrected seemingly were seeking after God, but in reality they were self-seeking. They didn’t see themselves as sinners in need of a Saviour. They saw themselves as good and godly people because they kept the Law. But in reality, they didn’t keep the Law because they didn’t apply it at the heart level—i.e. attention to cleanliness of the hands, but not condition of the heart. Thus, Jesus in effect said that they should be as careful about clean hearts as they were about clean hands. In v. 41, Jesus seems to be saying that if we deal with our heart before God, then everything that flows outward will be clean.

Then in 11:42-44, Jesus pronounced three woes on the Pharisees and set forth some of the specific problems He had with them.

II. Three woes to the Pharisees (vv. 42-44)

Woe #1 (v. 42)

Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

The word “woe” in the context of Christ’s ministry here is not an exclamation of judgment upon God’s enemies or of misfortune on oneself. Rather, it signifies Christ’s deep grief over those who fail to recognise the true misery of their condition (i.e. the Pharisees in this instance).

The first woe of our Lord concerns the Pharisees’ focus on the fine points, while missing the fundamentals. They majored on the minors.

¹ The late Robert Charles Sproul was an American Reformed theologian and ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America.

² C. Samuel Storms is an American Calvinist theologian, teacher and author. He is currently pastor of Bridgeway Church in Oklahoma City.

The Pharisees were meticulous about giving a tenth to God to the extent that they even tithed their spices! While Jesus upheld the obligation of tithing, He corrected the Pharisees for neglecting the weighty part of the Law, namely, justice and the love of God. E.g. a Pharisee would tell his parents that he could not help them financially because his money had been devoted to God (Mark 7:11). Technically, he was tithing, but practically, he was neglecting his own parents! So technically, he was observing the Law in every detail. But spiritually, he was neither loving God nor others at the heart level.

Do we observe appropriate dress codes and organizational practices in church? We do well if we observe these.

But do we somehow tolerate things like gossip, greed, and pride? If we do tolerate these, Jesus would consider that as inconsistency at the heart level.

You may have heard much about people like Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, C. S. Lewis, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Do you know what they had in common? Yes, they were all godly Christian men who were greatly used by God. But all these servants of God had one other thing in common—they all smoked, at least some of the time when they were in the ministry.

I believe if you smoke, you should quit as soon as possible, because it is damaging to your health, and not good stewardship of your body as well as the money in your wallet. The men I just mentioned perhaps all lived before that medical evidence was known.

But the caution in the 1st woe of Jesus is this: Do not readily question a person's faith in Christ just because he/she is doing certain things not according to what you can accept as proper external conduct.

I once heard a preacher who aptly put it this way: "Do not force-fit other people into our narrow Christian boxes."

Woe #2 (v. 43)

Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the marketplaces.

The second woe concerns the Pharisees' preoccupation with position, prestige, and the praise of men.

Jesus confronted them because they loved the front seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places. They loved to have people noticed how important they were!

Ambition is a double-edged sword. When it is God-directed and Spirit-managed, it can bear tremendous fruit. But when it is hijacked by self and ego, it can leave behind much damaging effects.

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If you have leadership gifts, you know what it is to be all excited about vision, mission, and passion. But if we are honest, our motivations are often a complex mix of both God-honouring desire and self-serving ambition. Perhaps that's the issue that Jesus was correcting when He spoke His 2nd woe to the Pharisees.

Apparently, the Pharisee concerned (literally "separate one") did not acknowledge that his heart was just as sinful as that of the prostitute or robber. No, he saw himself as few notches above these sinners. He had attained a righteous life by his own hard work and religious discipline.

It is good for us to examine ourselves with this question: "Whose approval matters most to me?" If we are honest, the praise of others often drives us. Old or young, we can allow approval pressure to affect us. If the approval of others is what matters most, Satan will find a way to use our need for affirmation to corrupt what we say and what we do. If that happens, we begin to "spin" things just so that we look good. What should matter most to us is God's approval and affirmation of us. So, we need to seek God to help us live and honour Him with undiluted desire.

Incidentally, it is interesting that Jesus accused the Pharisees of desiring "greetings in the marketplaces". It was in the marketplaces that they would have contact with those they considered "unclean". Probably these were also the ones from whom the Pharisees received honour and praise. Perhaps, bearing the defilement of these "unclean" in their minds, the Pharisees diligently observed the external ceremonial washings. It is like saying: "I don't want to be defiled by unclean people in the public places. But I need their praises and adulations. So never mind, I will go to these people in the public places. And when I get defiled by them, I can always come back to wash myself clean ceremonially."

So the caution in this 2nd woe is this: The desire to be congratulated outwardly can lead to our faith being compromised inwardly.

Woe #3 (v. 44)

Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it.

The third woe is the most pointed. Jesus charged the Pharisees of being a source of defilement, rather than of purification.

Jesus compared them to concealed tombs. If a Jew came in contact with a tomb or a dead body, he would be 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. Here, Jesus charged the Pharisees, who were meticulous about

such laws of cleanliness, of defiling the Jewish nation through their own spiritual death!

Legalism can hinder people from coming closer to God.

- It turns away unbelievers and keeps them from the truth of the Gospel, because they can see the inconsistency of the legalists.
- It misleads young believers who are mistakenly taught that if they do/avoid certain things, they will grow in holiness and be pleasing to God, even if these things are not absolutes in the Bible.

I'm not saying that Christian living should not have any rules. But if we take the Bible as a rule book and nothing more, we will miss the emphasis that the Bible is really God's love story to us in Jesus Christ. Thus, Christian living should be filled with the celebration and joy of knowing God in Jesus Christ.

Bryan Chapell: "Legalism makes believers think that God accepts them on the basis of what they do. Licentiousness makes believers think that God does not care what they do. Both errors have terrible spiritual consequences."³

In the Law which the Pharisees revered (Num. 19:16), the Israelites were taught that a person was rendered ceremonially unclean by coming into contact with a grave. The Pharisees thought of themselves as holy, and they saw their contribution as leading the nation in the direction of holiness. Jesus told them that the exact opposite was the case. They were themselves both unclean and defiling to others. Those who came into contact with the Pharisees were thus rendered unclean. Here was Jesus' most stunning blow to the self-righteous Pharisees.

The caution of the 3rd woe of Jesus to the Pharisees is this: People can be hindered from coming close to God because we are pushing them away with our self-righteousness.

Jesus' correction of the Pharisees should inform us that every group has its own tendencies towards error, its own temptations and failures.

Moving on in our text today, we see an expert in the Jewish law spoke up in self-defence—pointing out that Jesus' remarks not only condemn the Pharisees, but also insult the lawyers (v. 45). Rather than apologizing, Jesus launched into a series of three more woes, and this time on the lawyers (11:46-52).

³ Bryan Chapell is an American pastor and theologian who currently serves as the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church in America. He was previously the senior pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church in Peoria, Illinois. Prior to that he was president of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri for eighteen years.

II. Three other woes to the teachers of the Law (vv. 46-52)

Woe #4 (v. 46)

Jesus replied, "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them."

The first woe directed against the "experts in the law" was that their teaching produced a burden, not a blessing.

These "experts in the law" were a subset within the larger group of Pharisees. They were also known as scribes, very knowledgeable of the Old Testament Law and authorised to draft legal documents like divorce certificates. These lawyers had taken the commands of Scripture and had multiplied them into hundreds of minute adaptations. But they had also come up with legal loopholes that enabled them to skirt around their own rules, while the average person was still burdened with them.

E.g. on the Sabbath, the lawyers determined that you could only travel 1,000 yards from your house. But if a rope was tied from your house to one end of the street, the end of the street became the new limit of your residence (as if you now have a bigger house), and you could then go 1,000 yards beyond this newly adjusted limit.⁴

When the experts of the Law were done with interpreting and adapting the Law, it became a burden. What God had graciously given, they had made it to become an unbearable code of conduct, one which was so complicated that the people could not even understand it, let alone obey it.

One critical difference between Jesus' teaching of the Law and that of the Pharisees is that His teaching was motivated by a deep love for others, while theirs was very much a prideful love for self.

The second critical difference between Jesus' handling of the Law and that of the Pharisees is that His teaching resulted in grace/blessing, while theirs resulted in guilt/burden.

Woe #5 (v. 47-51)

47 Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your ancestors who killed them.

48 So you testify that you approve of what your ancestors did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Westminster Press, p. 158)

49 Because of this, God in his wisdom said, “I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.”

50 Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world,

51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.

Jesus likened the religious leaders of His time to their ancestors who killed the prophets of old. He was saying that the current leaders were finishing off the job that their ancestors started. As in all the other woes, the underlying problem is that they outwardly acted as if they honoured the prophets—i.e. building tombs as monuments of honour for these dead prophets. But inwardly they were repeating the very sins that the Old Testament prophets had spoken against.

Sometimes an elaborate funeral or tomb is not to express grief but to ease guilt; not to show love but to show off wealth. And it seems that this was the case with the experts in the Law. They went to great lengths to show honour to the dead prophets. But they were as guilty as those who rejected and killed the Old Testament prophets.

Woe #6 (v. 52)

Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.

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 deep/personal relationship with God.

The experts in the Law were the very ones who were withholding, indeed, concealing that truth. They set aside the Law by their distorted interpretations of Scripture. They set aside the prophets and all the inspired insights that God had revealed through them. In this sense, these legal experts were not pointing out the way of God, but straying people away from the true way of God.

Conclusion

Story is told of a widowed trapper (one who traps wild animals for their fur) who lived deep in the Alaskan wilderness with his 2-year-old son. On one occasion their food supplies had run out. The trapper had to go and get some more food. The weather outside was so fiercely cold that he reluctantly decided to leave his son behind, entrusted the child to the care of his faithful dog. While outdoors the weather got even more

unbearable, and the trapper was forced to take refuge overnight among some huge trees.

When the trapper returned the next morning to his cabin, he found the door open and the furniture overturned. A fierce struggle had taken place. There was no sign of his son and his dog lay in one corner looking at him guiltily, with blood all over his mouth. The trapper quickly figured out what had happened. The dog, without food, had turned on his son and killed him. Taking his axe from his side, the trapper killed his dog in a rage.

He then set about searching furiously for some sign of his son. As the trapper frantically searched, he heard a familiar cry coming from under the bed. He tipped the bed up and discovered his son. He was unharmed, without a scratch. The trapper, flooded with relief, took his son in his arms. When he turned around he saw a dead wolf, lying in another corner of the cabin. Then the trapper realised why his faithful dog had been covered in blood. It was the one who had fought the wolf and saved his son.

How often we can be like that trapper—judge everything quickly on the surface or by outward appearance; quickly assuming to know the truth about a person when in reality our judgements are terribly off the mark.

(<https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/judging-others/>)

Our text today warns us that one temptation we face as God's people is to focus on outward acts or appearances. E.g. we often take new Christians aside and try to "wash clean their evil habits" as though cleaning up the outside purifies the inside.

However, Jesus teaches us that when we first clean up the inside, our outward lives will clean up in due time though it would take time. On the contrary, cleaning up merely the outside tends to corrupt the inside even more because having cleaned up the outside of us, we become ensnared by pride and self-righteousness in our inner being.

Jesus says in Matt 22:37-38 – "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment."

May the Lord help us grow as people who obey God's commands as lovers after His heart, and not merely as keepers of His Law.

I am tempted to give you a few specific and practical things that you can do. But then, to do so is to tell you to fall back on outward actions or external

appearances—the very things that Jesus is correcting His audience in our text today. So how then shall we live?

I believe the best answer to that is for us to take time to search our hearts, reminding ourselves what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about:

- Admit our sins.
- Decide to deal with them without excusing them, diminishing them, denying them, covering them up, or even doing ritual ceremonies/Christian activities.
- The Christian faith and life is not about looking religious and clean on the outside by observing rules and rituals. Before anything else, it is about recognising within ourselves that we can do nothing on our own to be righteous and clean before God. But God has given us His Son (Jesus Christ) to make us righteous and clean from inside out when we acknowledge and accept Jesus into our lives as our Saving Hope and Sacred Master.

Whether you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ wanting to live out your Christian faith and life from the inside out, or a seeker of truth today, would you say these words to Jesus after me as He leads you in the depth and silence of your own heart as we close?

Prayer:

God in Heaven, the problems evidenced in Jesus' words of woe to the Pharisees are not just problems for people who lived a long time ago. They're also our problems today, they're our sins, and they're our temptations.

We seek you now to help us out of the temptation to justify ourselves, to cover up our own sin or to deal with it in some diminished way. Help us to recognize that only you can save and help us in your Son Jesus Christ. Indeed, there is no person so sinful who cannot be reached and cleansed by your mighty love and grace, if only we are willing to recognize and receive Jesus Christ as our Saving Hope and Sacred Master. Help us to do so even now from within our heart. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Reflect & Apply

1. What is legalism, and what are the signs that we're drifting into legalism?
2. Is it hypocritical or legalistic to obey God when we don't feel like it? Share.
3. How can we guard ourselves against legalism as well as correct others of their legalism in a Christ-like manner?

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