

Exalting Jesus Christ

"An Exposé of Legalism"

INTRODUCTION:

- I. There is nothing more frustrating in life than to feel we must somehow live up to the expectations of others.
 - A. This becomes especially difficult for the Christian who feels we must somehow live up to the standards others set for us.
 - 1. I'm not talking about living up to God's standards of right and wrong – we're all expected to do that.
 - a. That's what obedience is all about.
 - 2. Rather, I'm talking about living up to standards of right and wrong that are nothing more than the self-made standards of men.
 - a. Not only is that unbiblical, it forces us to constantly worry about doing or saying something that might bring criticism from others.
 - b. Plus, there is a certain arrogance associated with those who set themselves up as the judge of another person's conduct. There is generally nothing you can do to convince them that they're wrong.

B. The Pharisees – a very pious, religious sect of the Jews in Jesus' day – were experts at this.

1. They not only interpreted the Scriptures in a very narrow, legalistic way, they also judged others by those same narrow, legalistic interpretations of Scripture.
 - a. If you didn't conform to their standards of right and wrong, you were immediately branded as unfaithful.
2. Jesus had numerous head-to-head, nose-to-nose confrontations with these judgmental Pharisees.
 - a. He repeatedly condemned their endless lists of do's and don'ts.
 - b. These lists of do's and don'ts weren't found in the Scriptures, they were based on traditions handed down from one generation to another, until they were finally written down in what the Jews today call "The Mishnah."
 - c. However, Jesus deliberately refused to keep many of these traditions – mainly because they were from men and not from God.
 - d. Because of this, the Pharisees came to hate and despise Jesus and His disciples.

II. There are several things we need to understand about this kind of legalistic, judgmental attitude that, unfortunately, has found itself into the Lord's church today.

A. Nothing will kill a church faster than to allow the spirit of Pharisaical legalism to go unchallenged. But to challenge it, we first need to understand it.

1. So, what is Legalism? How do we define it?

a. Legalism is essentially conforming to a strict code of behavior for the purpose of exalting ourselves and making us appear to be more faithful to the Lord than others.

b. Legalists not only make lists of do's and don'ts, but as we said earlier, they judge themselves and others on how well everyone conforms to these lists. In a nutshell, legalism is "checklist Christianity."

2. How does legalism impact the church?

a. Legalism is devastating to a church because it often slips in unnoticed – like a deadly enemy cloaked in pious religious garb.

b. The apostle Paul described how legalists impact the church in his letter to the Galatians. He called them: **Galatians 2:4 –**
"false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to

spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage). . .

- c. Unfortunately, when the legalist finally reveals themselves for who they really are, peace, joy and unity in the church have already been destroyed, and everyone has become suspicious of one another's conduct.
 - 3. Why is legalism wrong?
 - a. First and foremost, legalism is wrong because it's unbiblical. Grace and liberty are the hallmarks of the Christian life, not keeping the narrow-minded rules and regulations of others.
 - b. And second, legalism is based on pride – arrogant pride. The legalist consider themselves holier, more faithful, more zealous, more pious, more religious than you – at least in their own mind.
- B. In the 18th chapter of Luke, Jesus taught a parable that gives is a perfect example of what judgmental legalism looks like.
1. **Luke 18:9-14** – *Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men — extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a*

week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

2. Did you notice the repeated use of the word "I" in the prayer of the Pharisee – his prayer was all about himself and how wonderfully pious and holy he was.
3. Unfortunately, he knew nothing of humility, and certainly had no concept of grace and forgiveness.
 - a. In fact, in this man's eyes he needed no forgiveness.
Everyone else was a sinner. Not him.
 - b. Therefore, in his own mind, no one was a good and righteous as he.

Body:

- I. As we continue our journey through the gospel of John, entitled "Exalting Jesus Christ," we come to an event in the 5th chapter of John where Jesus provides us with "An Expose of Legalism."

A. The issue behind this controversy was over the question of keeping the Sabbath.

1. But before we get into this passage, let's take a moment to understand three things the Scriptures actually taught about the Sabbath.
 - a. First, we need to understand the origin of the word "Sabbath."
 - b. Then, we need to take a look at the Law concerning the Sabbath.
 - c. And finally, we need to understand some of the traditions that were held by Jews concerning the Sabbath.

B. With this in mind, let's now take a closer look at all three:

1. First, the word Sabbath comes from a Hebrew word that simply means "rest."
 - a. In Genesis 1, we read that God completed His work of creation in six days.
 - b. Then in the next chapter we read: **Genesis 2:2 – And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.**
2. The Law about keeping of the Sabbath was given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai.

- a. Exodus 20:8-11 – *"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it."*
3. However, one group of Jews known as the Pharisees were not content to allow people to interpret that Sabbath law for themselves. And so, they made up with a whole set of traditions.
 - a. The Pharisees decided someone had to come up with a proper definition of "work" – this was done so that no one would violate the Sabbath law by working on the Sabbath.
 - b. But in essence, the Pharisees were actually adding man-made rules and regulations to God's law.
 - c. In fact, the Pharisees added some thirty-nine categories of unlawful work to the Law of God, along with a long number of tedious restrictions.
 - d. The Mishnah (the oral traditions of the Jews in written form) has this entry concerning work on the Sabbath: "If a man

removes his finger-nail by means of his nails or his teeth; and so, too, if he pulls 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 is liable to a sin-offering."

C. As we turn back to the fifth chapter of John we see just how far the Pharisees went to keep their man-made rules and regulations concerning the Sabbath.

1. There are five important points we want to consider as we take a closer look at this wonderful story:
 - a. First, we need to grasp the scene in which we find Jesus surrounded by human need.
 - b. Second, let's see how Jesus responded to one man's need with a miracle.
 - c. Third, let's examine the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees over this miracle – a miracle which Jesus deliberately performed on the Sabbath.
 - d. And forth, let's talk about the reaction of the Pharisees when they couldn't defend their Sabbath traditions.
 - e. And finally, let's make some application of this story to help us identify and confront legalism.

II. In the opening scene of John chapter five we find Jesus in the midst of the squalid stench, and the depressive, repulsive atmosphere of a pool in Jerusalem around which were gathered those who were sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed.

A. Jesus was literally surrounded by human need of the worst kind.

1. **John 5:1-5** – *After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2 Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. 3 In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water. 4 For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had. 5 Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years.*
2. If you recall from our last lesson, Jesus and His disciples had been in Galilee where He had healed the nobleman's son.
 - a. But now Jesus and His disciples had returned to Jerusalem to participate in one of the annual Jewish feast days – probably Passover or the Feast of Tabernacles.
3. While stopping the pool of Bethesda, Jesus happened to see a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.

- a. Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year – for thirty-eight years – this poor, pathetic man had lain in poverty, repulsion and despair.
- B. This brings us to the miracle Jesus performed .
 - 1. We're not told why Jesus focused on this particular man.
 - a. Perhaps everyone there knew that this man had been physically impaired for nearly four decades.
 - b. That would certainly make the miracle Jesus was about to perform even more obvious.
 - 2. **John 5:6-9a** – *When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" 7 The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me." 8 Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." 9 And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked.*
 - 3. Just as distance was no barrier to Jesus in healing the nobleman's son, so time is no obstacle in healing a man that had been lame for thirty-eight years.
 - a. Thirty-eight years of misery, shame, embarrassment and despair. . . and in a split second, it was all history!

4. I might add here that it doesn't matter how miserable your life has been – no matter how deformed and twisted your spiritual life may be – Jesus can change it in an instant.
 - a. It's never been a question of whether Jesus can heal you of your spiritual diseases.
 - b. Rather, it's a question of whether you want to be healed.
 - c. Maybe you're at the point to where your inner poverty is causing you to long for change – to long for the kind of spiritual healing that only Jesus can provide.
 - d. If you want that kind of spiritual healing, I guarantee that Jesus can give you the grace and strength to take up your bed and walk too.
 5. Naturally, we would think everyone would be thrilled that Jesus had done such a wonderful thing for such a desperate man, but that's not the case.
- C. Unfortunately, what Jesus did provoked a confrontation between Himself and the Pharisees.
1. Notice how quickly this moment of joy and celebration was overshadowed by judgmental legalism.
 - a. **John 5:9b-10** – *And that day was the Sabbath. 10 The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed."*

- b. This miracle must have sparked excitement and hope in the hearts of most present. But not everyone shared that excitement.
 - c. The Pharisees – the legalists in Jesus' day – were outraged! When they should have been on their knees praising God, they instead pulled out their rule-book and quoted condemnation – chapter and verse.
2. But as the controversy raged, Jesus quietly slipped away from the crowd, leaving the man, as a walking, talking miracle, to face the Pharisees on his own.
 - a. **John 5:11-15** – *He answered them, "He who made me well said to me, 'Take up your bed and walk.'" 12 Then they asked him, "Who is the Man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk'?" 13 But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, a multitude being in that place. 14 Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." 15 The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.*
3. In our next lesson, we'll look more closely at the claims Jesus made on this occasion.

D. But for now, notice the reaction of the Jews.

1. **John 5:16-18** – *For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath. 17 But Jesus answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." 18 Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.*
2. They not only learned Jesus had escaped, they also learned Jesus had claimed God was His Father.
3. Despite the miracle that had just been performed in their midst, and despite the undeniable fact that Jesus had performed this miracle, these Pharisees were still outraged – for two reasons:
 - a. First, in their mind Jesus had broken the Sabbath law.
 - (1). Of course Jesus had not broken God's Sabbath law, He had merely broken the Pharisee's interpretation of the Sabbath law.
 - b. And second, Jesus called God His Father – which the Pharisees correctly understood as a claim by Jesus to be equal to the Father in heaven.

- (1). Of course, as we will see in our next lesson, Jesus will make no apologies for claiming to be the Son of God – because He is.
4. Ironically, the Pharisees were the guilty ones here – not Jesus.
- a. They judged Jesus according to their own standards of right and wrong – not by God's standards – and refused to give credit to Jesus for the miracle He had performed.
 - b. And, they allowed their love of tradition to overshadow their love for God and their fellow man; and as a result, they grew to hate Jesus to the point of plotting to have Him murdered.
- E. So, how do we make application of this story to help us deal with legalism?
1. First, we must do everything we can to keep legalism from gaining a foothold in our lives and in the Lord's church.
 - a. We need to do just what Paul did – actively confront legalism and refuse to simply look the other way.
 - b. Concerning the legalists who demanded Gentile Christian men be circumcised, Paul wrote: **Galatians 2:5** – *to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.*
 - c. And, when Peter and others had been two-faced and didn't associate with Gentile converts when their Jewish brethren

came to town, Paul wrote: **Galatians 2:14** – *But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?*

- d. Paul refused to compromise with legalism for a second – even if it meant losing friends in the process.
 - e. No doubt this prompted him to write: **Galatians 4:16** – *Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?*
2. Second, to combat legalism we must be prepared to stand - even if it means we must stand alone.
- a. You don't see anyone standing with Paul when he had to confront Peter and the others about their hypocrisy.
 - b. **Galatians 2:11-13** – *Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; 12 for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. 13 And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.*

- c. Paul was a man of iron-clad conviction, and he wasn't about to stand by and allow anyone to start making man-made rules and regulations.
 - d. Even if it meant standing alone, and losing friends in the process, Paul would fight judgmental legalism and law-making with every ounce of his strength.
3. And finally, to overcome legalism we must learn to embrace grace.
- a. No one is saying we must compromise truth in our fight against legalism.
 - b. But rather than being so quick to judge someone's motives and condemn them for something we feel is wrong, perhaps we need to step back and take a closer look at our own motives and the way we judge others.
 - c. The legalist – like the Pharisees in this story – often become blinded to the good someone may be doing.
 - d. Instead, they condemn them for doing good in a way they feel is wrong – and by that I mean wrong in the eyes of the legalist, not wrong in God's eyes.
 - e. So rather than being so quick to assume the worst, try exercising a little grace and stop playing judge, jury and executioner.

CONCLUSION:

- I. In closing, I want us to consider some things the apostle Paul teaches us about judging others – it's found in the fourteenth chapter of Romans.
 - A. There are two important principles Paul teaches us in these verses about judging others by our own standards:
 1. **Romans 14:4** – *Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.*
 - a. We're not masters. We're all servants – servants of Jesus Christ.
 - b. Therefore, we have no right whatsoever to sit in judgment of another servant.
 - c. God doesn't give us the right to take ourselves the role of a master, and then begin judging others by our own standards of right and wrong as if we really were their master.
 2. **Romans 14:10-13** – *But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. 11 For it is written: "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God." 12 So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.*

- a. There is only one standard by which we will all be judged, and that's the standard set forth by our Master – our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
 - b. It is before His throne that we will all stand someday – not before your throne or my throne, but before His throne.
 - c. We will all give an account of ourselves to God.
3. So the bottom line is simply this:
- a. We need to stop playing judge of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and start doing all we can to strengthen and edify one another.
 - b. We need to leave the judging to the Lord.
- II. The fact that we will all be judged someday by Jesus Christ can be both comforting and troubling – depending on our relationship with Him.
- A. If you have come to Christ in faith and obedience to the gospel, and are living in keeping with His standards of right and wrong, you're in great shape.
1. You can have the same confidence as the apostle Paul.
- a. **2 Timothy 4:7-8** – *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous*

Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

- B. But if for some reason you still haven't obeyed the gospel; or have, but haven't remained faithful to the Lord; then standing before the judgment seat of Christ in your present condition will be terrifying.
 - 1. However, you don't need to fear that judgment if you:
 - a. Simply come to Christ in faith, repenting of your past sins, and then be baptized into Christ to have your past sins completely washed away. Or, if you will. . .
 - b. Come back to Christ, repenting of your past sins, confessing them to God, and asking Him to once again restore the fellowship with Him you once enjoyed when you first obeyed the gospel.