

Rejecting Legalism
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Matthew 12:1-14

When you hear the term “legalism” or “legalist”, what comes to mind?

Let me illustrate with a statement: *“If I want to control the game, I will just change the rules.”* Anyone who has ever played a board game with a five-year-old or spent much time analyzing the workings of the US. Congress understands that principle.

Illustration: The U.S. Constitution is the governing authority for our country. It was written by men and requires interpretation. God’s word is the governing authority for Christ-followers. It was divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit and also requires interpretation. The difference: the U.S. Constitution can be amended though amending it is difficult. God’s word is never to be added to or subtracted from. (Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:5–6; Rev. 22:18–19)ⁱ

In a theological context, when someone elevates man-made rules to the level of God’s commands, we call that LEGALISM. Why would anyone want to add rules to God’s Word? To be fair, some sincere people who want to be holy simply don’t understand grace. Grace feels risky; rules feel safer. Rules are measurable. Enforceable. Manageable. Others may have less pure motives — to control, to feel superior, or to manipulate. But in either case, when we bind people’s consciences where God has not bound them, that is not biblical Christianity.

In today’s text Jesus encountered LEGALISM and taught that righteousness isn’t about rigid religion, it is about God’s mercy and grace.

The point: Righteousness before God is received by grace, not earned by man-made rules. God’s Word is sufficient for salvation and godly living, so we must never elevate human traditions to the level of divine command.

Matthew 12:1–14 (NLT) — **1** At about that time Jesus was walking through some grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, so they began breaking off some heads of grain and eating them. **2** But some Pharisees saw them do it and protested, “Look, your disciples are breaking the law by harvesting grain on the Sabbath.”

- The disciples were not being accused of “grain theft.” Deuteronomy 23:24–25 allowed for “snacking” in someone’s field but not harvesting their crop.
- The accusation was they were doing it on the sabbath. In the eyes of the Pharisees, plucking grain was reaping and rubbing it in their hands was threshing. I’m not making it up!
- The fourth commandment (Exodus 20:8–11) simply says: *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy... you shall not do any work.”* That’s it!

- The rigid religionists added 39 categories of “work” NOT to do on the sabbath.ⁱⁱ
- Jesus responded by pointing to scripture in 1 Samuel 21:1-6.

3 Jesus said to them, “Haven’t you read in the Scriptures what David did when he and his companions were hungry? **4** He went into the house of God, and he and his companions broke the law by eating the sacred loaves of bread that only the priests are allowed to eat. **5** And haven’t you read in the law of Moses that the priests on duty in the Temple may work on the Sabbath? [More scripture: Num. 28:9-10]ⁱⁱⁱ **6** I tell you, there is one here who is even greater than the Temple! **7** But you would not have condemned my innocent disciples if you knew the meaning of this Scripture: ‘I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.’

- Jesus was responding to “man-made” rules with divinely inspired scripture.
- He quoted Hosea 6:6, **(NLT)** — **6** I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want burnt offerings.
- One commentator: *“The Pharisees were splitting hairs with their technicalities about reaping, threshing, and winnowing. They failed to understand compassion for people’s basic needs (in this case, the disciples’ hunger.)”^{iv}*
- They were focused on compliance not compassion. Rule-keeping not mercy.
- Now Jesus was about to really raise the blood pressure of these legalists:

8 For the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!”

- They knew he was referring to Himself.

9 Then Jesus went over to their synagogue, **10** where he noticed a man with a deformed hand. The Pharisees asked Jesus, “Does the law permit a person to work by healing on the Sabbath?” (They were hoping he would say yes, so they could bring charges against him.) **11** And he answered, “If you had a sheep that fell into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn’t you work to pull it out? Of course you would. **12** And how much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Yes, the law permits a person to do good on the Sabbath.” **13** Then he said to the man, “Hold out your hand.” So the man held out his hand, and it was restored, just like the other one! **14** Then the Pharisees called a meeting to plot how to kill Jesus.

- Apparently, it was not against the rules to plot murder on the Sabbath.
- Let’s zoom forward to you and me today. How do we spot a legalist? How should we deal with them? How can we keep from becoming legalistic? How can we avoid the other extreme: LICENSE? Those are big questions and we have a short time but let’s try to address them at a high level.
- First, let’s be clear on biblical obedience vs legalism:
 - **Biblical obedience:** Loving submission to God’s clear commands.
 - **Legalism:** Adding human rules to God’s commands and grounding righteousness in rule-keeping rather than grace.
- How can I spot legalism? A legalist typically:
 - **Adds to Scripture**
 - **Emphasizes externals over the heart** – *“A legalist measures righteousness by outward compliance rather than inward transformation.”*

- **Lacks mercy** – It has been said, “*When rules matter more than people, mercy has been lost.*” Let’s balance that with another statement: “*Grace upholds God’s standards while reflecting God’s heart.*”
- **Displays spiritual pride** - A legalist measures righteousness by comparison and performance, subtly trusting personal morality rather than Christ’s finished work (i.e. the Pharisee and tax collector in Luke 18:9–14).
- **Binds consciences** – When someone requires what God does NOT require, it is legalism. Legalism says: “*If it bothers me, it must be sin for you.*” Biblical liberty says: “*If Scripture allows it, conscience governs it.*”
- **Undermines grace** – Legalists SAY they are about grace, but they struggle with shifting back to rule-keeping. That was why Paul wrote to the Galatians in **Galatians 3:3 (NLT)** — **3** *How foolish can you be? After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?*
- How can I keep from being legalistic? Apply the points above to myself!
- How should I deal with legalists? I’m tempted to say: Pray (for them) and stay away (from them.) ☺ Okay, I’m kind of joking. If we are biblical we would:
 - Pray for them and correct them with gentleness (2 Tim. 2:25; Gal. 6:1).
 - Stand firm in our own gospel freedom (Gal. 5:1).
 - If divisiveness persists after warning, create distance (Titus 3:10).
- What if a legalist is trying to “bully” or manipulate you directly?
 - Ask: “*Where does Scripture teach this?*”
 - Is it a clear command, or an application?
 - Are we (you and them) interpreting it correctly? (See examples below)
 - Is this a wise principle rather than a binding rule? (i.e. Proverbs)
 - Does this reflect the mercy and humility of Christ?
- Here are two examples of misinterpretation of scripture as a “proof text.” The first two are fairly innocent, the second is extreme.
- With the best of intentions people sometimes quote 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 (NLT) “*Don’t you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit...*” to shame someone into eating right, exercising, not smoking, etc.
- Caring for our bodies is important so the intent is good. However, those verses were not about that. Paul was writing about not having sex with prostitutes!
- Another one. Some legalists quote 2 Corinthians 6:17 – “*Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord...*” as a command to avoid associating with unbelievers. Paul’s meaning (in context) was: Don’t participate in their idolatry or compromise your allegiance to Christ. Jesus ate with sinners!
- The CONTEXT of scripture matters. Now an extreme example:
- A legalist might say the Bible forbids getting a tattoo and quote Leviticus 19:28: “*You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the Lord.*” By the way, Leviticus 11:9–12 says don’t eat shrimp. Imagine the scandal if you got a tattoo while eating shrimp! ☺
- That “tattoo rule” was given to Israel to discourage pagan religion.
- It was an Old Covenant rule for those people at that time.
- One commentator wrote, “*Christ fulfilled the Mosaic covenant. Ceremonial and civil laws tied to Israel’s covenant are no longer binding. However, the moral*

truths that reflect God's character continue and are reaffirmed under the law of Christ in the New Covenant."

- My point is that we shouldn't twist and misinterpret scripture legalistically.
- A final danger of being legalistic. This same incident is documented in Mark's gospel. We are told in Mark 3:5 that right before Jesus healed the man's hand *"He looked around at them angrily and was deeply saddened by their hard hearts."* Being a legalist will harden your heart. The Pharisees didn't see a man who needed healing but a rule being broken.
- Legalism hardens the heart because it trains us to love rules more than people, performance more than grace, and control more than Christ.
- One more warning: Beware of the opposite extreme from legalism, LICENSE – using grace as permission to sin. Christian liberty is not permission to ignore God's commands or indulge the flesh (Gal. 5:13). Grace frees us from sin's penalty and power, not from the call to holiness and obedience.
- Studying Romans 14 & 1 Corinthians 8–10 will help us learn how to live biblically in our Christian liberty.
- Other thoughts?

So, What's the Takeaway?

- *"If I want to control the game, I will just change the rules."* A bullying legalist will just add some "rules" that are not in scripture if their goal is control or superiority.
- Charles Ryrie defined legalism as *"a fleshly attitude which conforms to a [man-made] code for the purpose of exalting self."*^v
- Some legalists mean well. They just need to get comfortable with grace!
- It has been said that, *"Legalism says, 'Keep the Law and God will love you.' Grace says, 'God has loved you, so keep the Law.'"*
- Chuck Swindoll supposedly said, *"Annoy a legalist. Try some grace."*
- Righteousness before God is received by grace, not earned by man-made rules.
- God's Word is sufficient for salvation and godly living, so we must never elevate human traditions to the level of divine command.
- In other words, if God didn't say it, we shouldn't require it.
- As we strive to be holy, let's also be people of mercy. Jesus told us to.

ⁱ **Deuteronomy 4:2 (NLT)** — **2** Do not add to or subtract from these commands I am giving you. Just obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you.

Proverbs 30:5–6 (NLT) — **5** Every word of God proves true. He is a shield to all who come to him for protection. **6** Do not add to his words, or he may rebuke you and expose you as a liar.

Revelation 22:18–19 (NLT) — **18** And I solemnly declare to everyone who hears the words of prophecy written in this book: If anyone adds anything to what is written here, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book. **19** And if anyone removes any of the words from this book of prophecy, God will remove that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city that are described in this book.

ⁱⁱ This Mishnah explicitly lists the 39 prohibited labors, derived from activities involved in building the Tabernacle (Mishkan) as described in Exodus 35, where the term "melakha" (work) appears 39 times.

Full List The categories include sowing, plowing, reaping, gathering, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, bleaching, hackling, dyeing, spinning, stretching the threads, making two meshes, weaving, unweaving, tying, untying, sewing, tearing, trapping, slaughtering, flaying, tanning, smoothing, scraping, and cutting to measure.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2025). Crossway Bibles.

^{iv} Barbieri, L. A., Jr. (1985). Matthew. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 45). Victor Books.

^v Swindoll, C. R. (2020). *Matthew 1–15* (Vol. 1A, p. 231). Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.