

## **Liberty or Legalism**

Mark 2:23-28

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Almost every state has surprising laws on their books.

- In Florida, a woman may be fined for falling asleep under a hair dryer.
- In Indiana, citizens are not allowed to attend a movie within four hours after eating garlic. That seems like a good law to me.
- In Iowa, a man with a moustache is forbidden from kissing a woman in public.
- In Moline, ice-skating at the Riverside pond during the months of June and August is strictly prohibited.
- In Normal, Illinois, it's against the law to make a face at a dog.
- In Wisconsin, it's against the law to serve apple pie in restaurants unless there is cheese on top of it. Makes perfect sense to me.

And, it's probably a good thing that I'm not a pastor in Nicholas County, West Virginia because no member of the clergy is allowed to tell jokes or humorous stories from the pulpit. Or, maybe that wouldn't apply to the humor I use...

We may laugh, or groan, at these out-of-date laws, because many of them seem absurd and ridiculous. But, if we were to list all the rules, expectations, and laws that are on the books in some churches today, chances are we'd stop laughing pretty quickly. Most of these religious regulations are not written down but some of us attempt to keep them, or expect others to do so.

Spiritual growth can be stunted, or even choked to death by the weeds of legalism. Legalism can be defined as a strict adherence to the law. Specifically, as it relates to faith, a legalist is one who believes that performance is the way to gain favor with God. Legalism is the human attempt to gain salvation or prove our spirituality by outward conformity to a list of religious "do's" and "don'ts."

## **Observations**

Before we jump into our text, here are some observations about legalism.

**1. We tend to think others are legalistic, but that we're not.** The fact is that we're all legalistic by nature. We tend to judge others by our own standards of what is acceptable and what isn't. In essence, we think our sins smell better than other people's. We have very little tolerance for people who sin differently than we do.

**2. Legalism is highly contagious.** While it's usually less conscious and systematized in our minds than it was among the Pharisees, legalism can spread like a bad virus through an entire congregation.

**3. Legalism can take a vibrant faith and make it dull and lifeless.** It can evaporate enthusiasm, jettison joy, and stifle spirituality. Instead of finding freedom through Christ, many believers are living with great burdens.

**4. Legalism produces self-righteousness and judgment.** Majoring in guilt and misguided sacrifice, legalism urges its followers to evaluate their relationship with God on the basis of standards and scores – and expects others to do the same. Superficial spirituality short-circuits the work of grace.

**5. Legalism makes us narrow and divisive.** The legalist insists that everyone live up to the standard they have adopted. In other words, everyone needs to be like me. When we think this way, we miss the delight of diversity in the church.

**6. Legalism makes it impossible for people to see Jesus.** There is nothing that pushes a non-Christian away faster than a list of rules and regulations. Some of us inadvertently portray Jesus as a drill sergeant instead of a delightful Savior.

The Sabbath (our Saturday) was a big deal in the Old Testament. Did you know that at the time of Jesus, Jewish leaders had established 39 Sabbath clarifications, with each having multiple subdivisions, making for over 1500 prohibitions? Here are some of them.

- It was unlawful to kill a flea that lands on your arm because that would make you guilty of hunting on the Sabbath.
- If a man's ox fell into the ditch, he could pull it out but if a man fell in, he had to stay there.
- You could dip your radish in salt but if you left it there too long you were pickling it, and thus working. The Pharisees actually had discussions on how long it took to pickle a radish.

- You could only eat an egg that had been laid on the Sabbath if you killed the chicken for working on the Sabbath.
- It was OK to spit on a rock on the Sabbath, but you couldn't spit on the ground, because that made mud, and mud was mortar, and that was work.

The Jewish *Talmud*, which is like a commentary that codifies and explains the intricacies of acceptable behavior, has 24 chapters of Sabbath laws. One rabbi said he spent two and a half years studying just one chapter to figure out the minutia of what could be picked up and carried on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees attacked Jesus about the Sabbath six different times in the gospels. Five of them have to do with Jesus healing on this holy day and one has to do with the behavior of the disciples.

With all that as background listen to Mark 2:23-28: “*One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, ‘Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’ And he said to them, ‘Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?’ And he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.’”*

I’m going to borrow a three-word outline from another pastor that helps us see the flow of this narrative.

- Accusation** (23-24)
- Answer** (25-26)
- Application** (27-28)

**1. Accusation.** The Pharisees and other religious leaders are ramping up their accusations against Jesus. They were offended when Jesus forgave sin and they were really torqued when the disciples of Jesus weren’t fasting as Pastor Tim helped us understand last week. Here’s something Tim taught us: “*When personal preference becomes spiritual commandment the seeds of pride produce legalism and tradition.*” We’re to trump our traditions with the Word of God and make sure we don’t lose our elasticity by holding on to our brittle categories.

Let's look a bit closer at verse 23: "***One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain.***" While there were main roads in Israel, it was quite common to cut through fields to get to where you wanted to go. While foreign to us, if you were hungry it was ok to pluck the ripe grain, rub it in your hands to break open the husks, and then eat the kernels. This wouldn't go over well today if someone cut through your backyard and stopped to pick stuff out of your garden, would it? This practice in Israel served as a public welfare system so no one would go hungry.

All of this was perfectly legit. Listen to Deuteronomy 23:25: "***If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain.***" If you drove your John Deere combine through your neighbor's field, you might have some problems but you could eat what you wanted while you were walking. In addition, farmers were to leave grain standing in the corners after harvest so the disenfranchised could have some dinner.

Notice that the Pharisees don't attack the disciples for gorging on the grain. They don't accuse them of stealing but of harvesting and threshing, which in their minds, was working on the Sabbath. In Luke 6:11, which is a parallel passage, we read: "***His disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands.***" Rolling the grain to remove the husks was considered sifting. Rubbing the kernel was threshing. Eating was grinding. And tossing the chaff in the air was winnowing. They're basing all this on Exodus 34:21: "***Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest.***"

While we don't read that Jesus is eating (He probably was), the Pharisees hold Jesus responsible for the behavior of his followers. This was actually a common understanding in that culture. If a rabbi's disciples did something wrong, the rabbi himself was held accountable. It's good for us to pause here and recognize that our behavior reflects either positively or negatively on the Lord as well. Look at verse 24: "***And the Pharisees were saying to Him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?'"***

I get the sense that these religious guys are following the followers of Jesus around, just looking to pounce on them. It's like they're playing the "Gotcha" game. We see that in the use of the word, "***Look...***" Notice also that their

accusation is in the present tense: “*were saying to him.*” This is not a one-time accusation but rather something they continuously repeated. They couldn’t let it go. The Pharisees loved to ask “*why*” questions like we saw in 2:16: “*Why does he eat?*” and in 2:18: “*Why do John’s disciples fast?*”

Serving as religious traffic cops, the Pharisees were waiting to write tickets about Sabbath-breaking. They’re basically charging them, and therefore Jesus, with breaking one of the 10 Commandments: “*Why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?*”

Jesus wanted everyone to know that doing that which is good trumps Sabbath-keeping. By the way, are you picking up that Jesus purposely did things on the Sabbath in order to rile up the religious leaders? The Sabbath was intended to be a special sign between Jehovah and His covenant people. Let’s reflect on the two main purposes behind Sabbath observance in the Old Testament.

- **Rest.** The word “**Sabbath**” comes from *sabbaton*, which literally means, “*A cessation from labor; to desist from exertion.*” The double beta, or double B, communicates an intensive form or a complete cessation. Ligon Duncan refers to the Sabbath as “*the stop-working day.*”
- **Rhythm.** God set up a rhythm of work and rest; of labor and then leisure. Exodus 20:9-10: “*Six days you shall labor and do all your work...But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work...*” In verse 11, the model for Sabbath rest is the cadence found in creation: “*For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*”

**2. Answer.** I love how Jesus refuses to argue with their accusation but instead appeals to Scripture to show there is biblical evidence that compassion is more important than the commandment. He’s actually rebuking them with a touch of sarcasm when He says in verse 25: “**Have you never read?**” He loved to answer questions with a question. This is a great model for us, isn’t it? We must always go back to the Bible. Jesus did this often. Let’s look at just two examples from Mark 12. Check out verse 10: “**Have you not read this Scripture?**” In verse 26, He exposes the Sadducees: “*Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?*”

In verses 25-26, Jesus takes them back to an incident found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6:  
***"Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?"***

Jesus is appealing to David, who is someone who they certainly respect and honor. King Saul was pursuing David (Jesus is in the line of David and is being pursued by the Pharisees) and David's companions are hungry (David had "disciples" who were also looking for food). David asks a priest for some help and is told that the only bread is the holy bread, also called the Showbread, or the "Bread of the Presence."

This showbread was 12 loaves of bread, to represent the 12 tribes of Israel, that were baked fresh every Sabbath Day (note that this would have been considered "work" by the Pharisees). The loaves were placed on a table in the holy place in the Tabernacle to remind Israel of the Lord's presence and their dependence on Him for their daily bread. This bread was replaced every Sabbath and the old bread was eaten by the priests. Leviticus 24:9 says that no one was allowed to eat this bread except for Aaron's descendants who served as priests. But in this case, the priest gave David and his hungry men this bread.

Here's the principal. *Human needs transcend religious rituals.* There are times when human needs are more important than a legalistic keeping of the Law. Here's the argument. If David and his disciples were allowed to violate a rule, then the greater David could allow his disciples to violate an *unbiblical* regulation on the Sabbath. It's really an argument from the greater to the lesser. In David's case, it was not the mere question of picking some grain but the more serious charge of eating the Bread of the Presence. The point is that even though it was theoretically illegal, God didn't rebuke David. Therefore, how much more is it OK for Jesus' disciples to eat though they were *not* breaking the Law?

Listen. God is more concerned with meeting people's needs than He is with protecting traditions. In Matthew's reporting of this account, Jesus' heart of mercy and compassion come to the surface. Listen to Matthew 12:7: "***If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.***" Love for others is more important than legalistic obstinacy.

Here are two examples that come to mind. What would you think if a young man wore a hat in church? How many of you would be bothered by that? Would you think he was being disrespectful? Would it be easier to give grace if you found out that he has alopecia, and was embarrassed because all of his hair was falling out? Would it then be OK with you if he wore a hat? This is an actual example that took place right here in our building about three weeks ago. Ritualistic rules can crush compassion. *Human needs transcend religious rituals.*

The other example is more personal and embarrassing but I'll share it anyway. I was preaching in our previous church one Sunday when I noticed a teenager up in our balcony texting on her phone during the entire sermon. I found myself getting upset even while I was preaching. I couldn't believe how rude she was being. It made me want to call her out but I held my tongue.

After the service I made my way over to her, ready to tell her what I thought of her tenacious texting during my amazing sermon. Just before I corrected her, I overheard her tell someone that she was really bummed out that her friend didn't come to church that morning. When she realized that her friend wasn't going to make it, she decided to text the sermon in real time to her. I was busted. She was helping a friend learn about Jesus while I was being judgmental and legalistic. *Human needs transcend religious rituals.*

I heard someone say that as we get older, we have to guard against the *hardening of our categories*.

**3. Application.** After their accusation, Jesus gives an answer and then concludes with two applications.

- **The Sabbath was given to serve us.** In verse 27, Jesus cuts through the religious rules and rituals to the reason behind the giving of the Sabbath: "**And He said** [this is also in the imperfect tense so it reads, "*He was continuing to say*"] **to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.’”** So, here's a question. *Which came first, man or the Sabbath?* Man was made on the sixth day; Sabbath came on the seventh. In my research this week I learned that some rabbis actually taught that humans were created *in order* to keep the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was given to people out of the grace of God. It was designed to be a blessing, not something to hold us in bondage. We could say that the

Sabbath was given to serve man, not something that we must serve. This day of rest was to be a time of refreshment not a day of restriction; not a duty, but a delight. Unfortunately, because the religious leaders had added a bunch of laws and rules and regulations to it, it had become burdensome.

In the very next chapter, Jesus asks a question that no doubt unsettled the religious guys in verse 4: “*And he said to them, ‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent.*” Here’s a helpful question to ask so see if any religious rules or legalistic limitations have taken root in your life: *Is this practice a benefit or is it leading to bondage?*

- **Serve the one who is Sovereign over the Sabbath.** We see this in verse 28: “*So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.*” The title “**Son of Man**” is messianic, meaning it was used of the Anointed One, the coming one, to free God’s people. The Pharisees would have recognized what Jesus was saying. But just in case they didn’t get it, Jesus boldly refers to Himself as “**Lord of the Sabbath.**” Jesus is declaring Himself as Sovereign God. The title “**Lord**” refers to one to whom all things belong, like an owner. Jesus has authority over the Sabbath because He is the Almighty God. In Matthew 12:6, the parallel passage, Jesus puts it this way: “*I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.*”

Tim Keller says, “*His self-awareness is startling. No other human teacher has made anything like the claim He makes.*” Jesus is Sovereign over the Sabbath. He owns it and redefines its purpose. It is far more important to have a relationship with Him than to follow a bunch of rules and regulations. When Jesus says He is the Lord of the Sabbath, He is the Sabbath. He has authority over the Sabbath and over everything and everyone. That means the disciples can do whatever He directs them to do.

After healing a man on the Sabbath who had been an invalid for 38 years, the Pharisees were furious with Jesus. They knew that He was declaring His sovereignty over the Sabbath and it really bothered them. We see this clearly in John 5:18: “*For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*”

## Salvation Rest

Jesus is the only way to have rest because Sabbath is all about rest. Instead of busily following a list of legalistic rules and working to be accepted by God, it's time to believe and rest in your acceptance. Check out Hebrews 4:1-3:

***"Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. Now we who have believed enter that rest..."***

The promise of a temporary Sabbath rest, or entering Canaan, was really a picture of the eternal rest that Christ provides. Once we put our faith in Christ and believe in Him, we will find the only rest that can satisfy our souls.

Hebrews 4:9-11: ***"There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience."***

Have you received that rest or are you banking on a list of burdensome rules? When it comes to heaven, you only have two options.

- 1. You can try to work your way in, which will never work.**
- 2. Or you get in by the work of another.** We must rest from all efforts to be saved by our own works because in Christ we find a total rest.

Look at it this way. Rest is all about satisfaction and completion.

- God the Father finished His work of creation and then rested in Genesis 2:2. He was so satisfied with His work that He could sit back and declare: "***It is good.***"
- Jesus completed His work when He said, "***It is Finished***" in John 19:30.
- We can only find satisfaction when we rest in the work that has been finished for us on the cross.

Jesus said this in Matthew 11:28-29: ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."***

It's time to stop striving and to cease trying to measure up to God's standards. Its time to enter His salvation rest right now.

### Action Steps

- 1. Receive the rest that only Christ can give you.** If you persist in working, if you feel like you just have to *do* something, then ponder these words from Jesus in John 6:29: "*The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.*"
- 2. Submit to the Sovereignty of Jesus Christ.** If you haven't fully surrendered, it's time to do so.
- 3. Set apart a day for worship.** The principle behind Sabbath is to take a day to establish rhythm, rest, recalibration, refreshment and renewal.
- 4. Put love over legalism.** One way to do that is by giving to the Mobile Ultrasound Project. You could go into a legalistic mode and say something like this, "*Those who get pregnant outside of marriage deserve what happened to them because of their sin.*" Or you could operate out of mercy for those in need, knowing that love transcends legalism.
- 5. Invite your friends and neighbors and family members to our December series called, "Christmas B.C."**

**Closing Song: "God You Reign"**