

Legalism vs Grace

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[0 : 00] Verse 18 to 22, the question about fasting was going to broaden out the principles of that passage. Mark 2, 18 to 22.

Seems so obvious to say, but there are of course many problems. Many problems in the church today, many man-made problems, many hindrances to the effective witness of the church in a fallen world.

We could list, I'm sure you'll know them. There's spiritual pride. Spiritual pride, you know, when the gospel is presented, not so much to glorify God, but to glorify self.

There's the problem, as we saw last Lord's Day evening, the problem of half-hearted service. Remember, we were looking in Haggai, one of the exiles who'd returned from Babylon, and they were far more concerned about their own livelihood, their own houses, their own material well-being, rather than giving glory to God in the rebuilding of the temple, the completion of the temple.

So half-hearted service is another problem in the church. And as we made a principle of that truth, there's that whole problem of not putting God first, not putting first things first.

[1 : 28] There's the lack of brotherly love, brotherly love between Christians, that so mars, so spoils the work of the gospel, the gospel that proclaims salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ, one saviour, one faith.

And yet when the church divides as it does and has done, again, that's such a hindrance to the effective witness of the church. There are many problems that stem from the heart of man that spoil any church, any congregation.

But I believe that one of the greatest dangers to the church in our day is legalism. Now, we'll develop that more, obviously more detailed, but legalism, it's, you know, maybe it's perhaps for some of you the first time you've heard that expression.

It's something that, it's not just something that theologians discuss on a Friday evening on the mound. It's a blight. Legalism is a blight on any church that professes the grace of God and the Lord Jesus.

Because legalism, as we'll see, as we'll go into the passage, legalism is the opposite of grace. Legalism is that opposition to grace.

[2 : 45] Remember that Jesus was directing his comments on, as we read there in his latest stuff, his encounters with the Pharisees, those who were opposed to his ministry. And so, it's absolutely relevant that we look at what we read in God's Word that's pertinent, that's relevant to ourselves, to getting our priorities right, to put God first.

So, most of you know this passage. It's a passage which I believe we can take three things from. We'll obviously have to look at the legalism of the Pharisees and then look at the response of Jesus to that legalism.

And then thirdly, particularly in the two little parables that Jesus tells there from verse 21, that the place of grace in opposition to legalism.

Legalism, the legalism of the Pharisees. Now, that's what we read right from the start of chapter 2 because you'll notice, as we were reading from the start of the chapter, that Jesus has already faced opposition from the Pharisees.

He's already been confronted by these people who are opposed to his ministry. That's what we read at the start of chapter 2. Jesus' religious opponent questioning his authority to forgive sin.

[4 : 05] Remember Jesus, Jesus tells the healed paralytic that the sins are forgiven. Why? What was the response of Jesus' opponents?

They accuse him of blasphemy. They accuse him of being somebody who's usurping, who's taking on the authority of God, challenging the authority of God.

Why does this man speak like this? He's blaspheming. Who can forgive sins but God alone? And then you notice, almost immediately following that confrontation, Jesus' opponents ask him another question about, well, Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners.

Verse 15 and 16. Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners? I mean, Jesus had forgiven sins in his authority as the Son of God.

Jesus had eaten with the outcasts of society. Why? Because Jesus wants to show why he's come from heaven to earth. He's come to save the lost. He's come as the great physician to heal us of our spiritual diseases and sickness, the sickness of sin.

[5 : 13] But his opponents didn't see it like that. All that his opponents saw was their traditions being flouted. All that they saw was their man-made traditions, their man-made additions.

Their additions to the law of God. And all they saw was Jesus flouting these additions and traditions. These Pharisees, we might say, were the classic legalists of the day.

So, what do we mean by legalism? What do we mean by someone who's a legalist? What caused Jesus to so challenge that kind of thinking?

What still lurks within the church today? There's only many in the church today. What even in our own hearts? So that we have to test our own hearts to see if that of legalism, the sin of legalism lurks there.

Well, in a nutshell, in a nutshell, legalism is law without love. It's law without grace. In other words, it's a focus on do's and don'ts without any desire to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

[6 : 25] A legalist will, you know, yes, will seek to keep the commandments, but just do it as an end in themselves. And then there's the add-ons, the additions, the additions to the law of God.

As we see here spelled out these first few verses from verse 18. The add-ons. Adding man-made rules as if they are from God, as if they're divine, as if they've got the same stamp of authority as the law of God.

Now, that kind of focus has certainly caused so much staying in the church, even in the experience of many here. You know, that twisting of God's law, that censoring those things which in and of themselves do not dishonour God.

Now, we could think of many, many examples. Let's take one. Let's take one example. There are hundreds of examples we could look at. But let's take one example.

Let's take the church building. For many, or we'd say for a legalist, a church building is equated with a holy of holies like, you know, the Old Testament temple.

[7 : 41] You know, a house of God is considered a house of God for legitimate everyday practice or, you know, somehow consider forbidden to take place in the church.

As if there's some kind of magical barrier between, you know, this part of the building and that door there. Something that I have had to deal with in my own fight against my own legalism.

Now, of course, we're going to take care of this building. Of course, we're going to look after the fabric of this building. We're to be good stewards of the resources that God has given us, that He's blessed us with.

And we'll take care of this particular part of the building where we worship together on a Lord's Day. But we will not regard this building, this place of worship, as somehow sacrificed.

Why? Because the church is not a building. The church is a people. Now, as I say, we could go through so many other examples. But let's just look at the legalism of the Pharisees here.

[8 : 43] What were they accusing Jesus of? Well, they were actually accusing, or they were actually revealing in themselves a misguided approach to the law of God.

I mean, there's Jesus being accused of breaking their tradition. As we saw there at the start, verse 18. Now, John's disciples, John the Baptist's disciples, the Pharisees are fasting.

People came and said to him, why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast? But your disciples do not fast. Now, in and of itself, there's nothing wrong with fasting.

There was actually one day, the day of atonement, Yom Kippur, one day prescribed for fasting in the Old Testament.

And you go to the Old Testament and you see many saints of God fasting in conjunction with prayer. You go to Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, they all fasted.

[9 : 43] They all fasted. They all fasted accompanied by prayer. They waited in God. They were denying themselves. They were fasting in order to focus in their communion with God.

They did so voluntarily. Jesus himself fasted. Remember in the desert when Jesus, prior to Jesus being tempted of the devil, he fasted 40 days.

He did so willingly. You can go to the Sermon on the Mount. What does Jesus say? When you fast. So, there's absolutely nothing wrong with fasting.

But of course, context and motive are so important when we see this, what's happening here. You see, for the Pharisees of Jesus' day, just as for the modern day Pharisees, whether we're looking at fasting or whether we're looking at any other external, outside action, you know, that's more just a mechanical, you know, upholding God's law rather than a glorifying God and denying self.

That's where the tragedy is. You see, the Pharisees had added fasting to their long list of actions that were meant to show how holy they were.

[11 : 01] You know, the more regularly fasted, it was meant to show how wonderfully holy they were and how deserving they were of God's favour. So motive, their motive, it was to win favour from God.

It was, you know, by their works, their external actions. And so when they're condemning Jesus' disciples for not fasting, they were actually showing in themselves that they had no love of God.

They were showing a condemning spirit which sadly, we have to say, is still alive and, well, yes, in the church today. But fasting for the right motive, as there's any other external aspects of our practice, but fasting for the right motive is totally, totally in keeping with glorifying God when we deny self and glorify Him.

I mean, the Pharisees, they fasted because they wanted to win the favour of God and they wanted others to see it. They wanted others to, you know, have such a good impression of these Pharisees, you know, in their outward display of fasting.

They even, you know, made their face look different so that people would say, oh, aren't they wonderful for that, what they're doing? Remember, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commanded those who do fast to do it in secret, not for show.

[12 : 25] In other words, to have that true humility before God. And, you know, we can, we all do it, we can so mistakenly add our own rules to God's law.

We can form traditions that, well, really are contrary to the work of God, the Word of God. Now, don't get me wrong, tradition in and of itself, tradition is a worthy part of our heritage.

Where, where tradition is in conformity to the Word of God, where tradition seeks to honour God, you know, in our practice, in our worship, in our witness. Let's take one example, something that's coming up soon.

Communion. Communion season. That's a tradition. It's a worthy tradition. Because, you know, in our communion, times of communion, or what we call our seasons, they speak of preparation.

This examining of ourselves. And also in our participation in the supper. But we don't make these seasons a compulsory part of church practice.

[13 : 30] You know, just to abide by certain practices, certain patterns of practice. Now, many of you know that in parts of our denomination, a communion season lasts from a Thursday till Monday.

We have a Saturday and Sunday in our particular practice. So, God willing, it will happen in a couple of weeks' time. But we do so to glorify God.

We do it in corporate worship. We gather together in the preparation and in the supper itself. We're not going to condemn others who have different practices, you know, concerning the frequency of communion or, you know, the number of services that they have that's attached to a communion season.

Somebody's written, we have no right to heap up restrictions on people where God has no stated restriction. So, context is important. I mean, Jesus wasn't here condemning fasting, you know, as an act of contrition before God.

Jesus, you see there, Jesus didn't condemn the disciples of John the Baptist for their fasting. But what Jesus did, what he did see, is concern context.

[14 : 43] And that's where we see the response of Jesus to legalism. As you see from verse 19, and Jesus said to them, can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?

As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them and then they will fast on that day. Now, what's Jesus saying here?

Fasting, well, we've mentioned Old Testament disciples who fasted and prayed. But fasting in Old Testament times was often associated with funerals, with mourning, and Jesus is telling his accusers, he's saying, the disciples aren't yet in a time of mourning.

They've got the bridegroom with them. They're the wedding guests. Well, of course, who's the bridegroom? Jesus. Jesus, remember, would speak of himself as the bridegroom in the church, the bride of Christ.

But what's the point that Jesus is making here? Surely the point is this. Jesus' disciples, they don't need to fast. He's saying, one day they will mourn when Jesus is taken from them in death.

[15 : 53] Then they'll mourn. But that time isn't yet. So context is important. It's interesting, actually, when Jesus speaks here of the bridegroom being taken from them, this is actually the very first time that Mark records the imminent death of Jesus.

and that death, yes, for a time, did bring mourning to the disciples. They were despondent. They were distraught when Jesus died on the cross.

But remember, their mourning was turned to joy when the risen Lord Jesus appeared to them. Sometimes we were looking in John's Gospel, John 16, why we read John 16, because as Jesus was nearing to the time of his death, Jesus did speak of mourning in relation to his being taken away as we read there in John 16.

And that's why we read these two passages together. Because Jesus, being with his disciples, ensured they didn't need to have the fasting of mourning.

But bring this to ourselves, to our own context. Jesus is with us now. He's with us by his Spirit. So we have no need of the fasting of mourning. Now, you have that liberty to, yes, to fast, to pray and fast.

[17 : 20] You have that liberty to do these things in an act of humility and self-denial. But we don't mourn that bridegroom's been taken away from us.

No. Because he's risen. He's alive. He's with us. He's promised. And so, therefore, that truth should, you know, elicit within your heart. Rejoicing.

It's not mourning. We don't mourn that the Saviour has died on the cross. We rejoice that he's died for our sins. That he's risen again and seated at the right hand of the Father. And you who know him as Saviour, united to the risen, living Saviour, united to him by faith, is your heart rejoicing because of that.

So, we've seen, so far, Jesus has been challenging the legalism of the Pharisees. And that, remember, is utterly relevant still today.

Because, in Jesus challenging the legalism of the Pharisees, he's challenging each and every one of us, each and every one of us who desires to glorify God, to guard against a false holiness, you know, that appears commendable, but actually shows a graceless heart that is devoid of the love of God and of fellow man.

[18 : 42] And to emphasize that, Jesus gives two short parables from everyday life at that time. I'm sure you've heard of them before, but let's look at them again.

The place of grace is in opposition to legalism. Let's read verse 21 again. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins and the wine is destroyed and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.

Now there are people in this congregation far more qualified than I am to talk about the properties of fabric and the error of sewing new cloth, new unshrunk cloth into an old garment.

And I suspect what's the word for someone who studies wine and an oinologist? Oinologist. Maybe we have far greater knowledge than I have of the properties of wine. But, well, it doesn't really matter, you know, about your knowledge of these particular things because the point that Jesus is making is absolutely clear.

[19 : 51] Jesus is using simple everyday object lessons, using the culture of the day to show his point about the errors of legalism.

I mean, these two parables are stories from everyday life with a spiritual application. I mean, you know, look at the parable of the unshrunk cloth.

What's the parable pointing to? What about this new wine? What's that pointing to? Well, the new unshrunk cloth surely is the new work that Jesus has brought in his grace.

What's that new work? It's the work of salvation, the grace of salvation. Through faith in him and not by work. The old garments, surely the legalism of the Pharisees.

In other words, the two don't mix. The new wine, again, the new wine surely is the new way, the new way of salvation. That new way that the Pharisees wouldn't accept.

[20 : 54] The new wine of grace couldn't mix with the old legalism. The old legalism that was represented in the wineskin, you know, the animal skin that contained the wine in these days.

If the new wine came into the old wineskin, the wineskin would burst if the new wine was poured into it. But bring all this to ourselves. legalism, man-made traditions, non-biblical rules do not and cannot be absorbed into the new way of Jesus, the way of grace.

Legalism can't, can't sit side by side with a way of salvation. the two are incompatible. You know, we really have to stress this again and again because the essence, the core, the root of Christianity is not following.

It's not about following the right rules. It's not about following the rules. The essence of Christianity is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. repentance, faith, following Jesus.

The true test of your relationship with God, a right relationship with God, a true test of that is not about keeping the external, the acts, if you like.

[22 : 15] Now, let's just be clear here. James, in his epistle, James, we're beginning to look through in our midweek Bible studies, midweek meetings.

Remember what James says, our works, yes, will be evidence of our faith, but these works don't save us. The true test of your relationship with God is a repentance of heart.

It's a confession of sin. It's receiving the Lord Jesus as Saviour. It's your trust in Him, trusting in His finished work on the cross. You can't make the externals of faith a test of true Christianity.

So, what have we got to say in conclusion? This whole matter of legalism versus grace. Well, let's just think of grace. Let's think of grace. I think it's one of the most beautiful words in the whole of English language because it is the most beautiful gift of God.

What's the work of the church? Above all, the work of the church is to proclaim the gospel, is to proclaim the good news of salvation found in the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

[23 : 26] That gospel call, the gospel call is a call to repentance, to holiness, to godliness. holiness. How is that possible? How is it possible for you to live a life of holiness?

How is it possible for you to repent of your sins? How is it possible for you to live that life of godliness and service? It's possible only through the grace of God, through the unmerited favour of God towards undeserving sinners such as ourselves.

And you know, while we preach the good news of salvation in Jesus, the world resists that message. The world will mock it. The world will take offence.

But perish the thought that the church is going to preach something contrary to the grace of God. But perish the thought that the church tries to add in a legalism that actually repels rather than attracts.

Because legalism does not promote the Christian message of grace, the grace of the Lord Jesus. I hope that we've seen this evening that what we've been considering from this passage is much, much more than, you know, some kind of theological discussion.

[24 : 43] You know, for another group, not at all. It's utterly important to each one of us. Because, you know, when we bring everything to a conclusion here, we're seeing in this passage two roads.

Two roads. One road that appears to lead to salvation but totally misses the mark. It's that road, it's that way of legalism. The religion of the Pharisees.

That religion, that belief that they know that taught that God was going to be faithful to them if they kept the law, if they used their man-made traditions, if they even added to the law just as a sort of outer protection to keep them from breaking the law of God.

the kind of thinking that says that your salvation is dependent on your contribution to your salvation. Well, it's a road, all right, there's a way but it's not a road that leads to heaven, it's not a road that leads to salvation.

But there's another road, there's another way and that's the road of life, the road to eternal life, the glory of heaven where Lord Jesus is forever.

[25 : 50] that road that Jesus proclaimed of himself, that road that Jesus proclaimed about grace, the unmerited favour of God when he spoke of free forgiveness with absolutely no contribution of man towards that forgiveness.

You see, with the Pharisees, man played a central part in that salvation which in fact was no salvation at all. But Jesus, when Jesus preached, when he taught of himself, he began with God and spoke and told the truth that salvation depends entirely on God.

And so, I have to close with a question tonight and ask you which road are you on? Which way are you on? Is it God's road, God's way or man's way? Have you put your full trust in the Lord Jesus knowing that he has done all, he's done everything for you to win salvation for you?

Or do you still have that mindset that thinks that you've got to do something to win salvation by your own effort? I pray that that kind of mindset will be discarded and that you'll turn to the Lord Jesus and that you'll look to him and receive him as your saviour, the saviour of grace.

Amen. Let us pray. Oh Lord, our God, forgive us for the many times when we have distorted the gospel of grace. Forgive us, Lord, for our cold legalism.

[27 : 29] Forgive us, Lord, when we have set man-made tradition there is no basis in your word against the very word and truth of God. Enable us, Lord, to use the liberty that you give us to glorify you, to do that which honours and glorifies you, not for self, but for your sake.

So we thank you, Lord, that you have given to us that new way, that new and living way. May each and every one here this evening follow in that way, that narrow way that leads to life.

Lord, go before us, we pray, bless all that has been said this evening. Forgive anything said wrongly from this pulpit. Forgive all that has been contrary to your word.

Forgive our distracting thoughts. But Lord, we thank you that you are the God who forgives us our sins. Bless the remainder of this evening, we pray. Bless David Beetson when he talks to us about the work of Barnabas Fund.

Bless all that we do in your name, even for the rest of this day. We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, let's close in Psalm 34 and sing Psalm, Psalm 34 on page 40.

[28 : 49] We'll sing from the beginning down to verse 7. At all times I will bless the Lord, and I'll praise him with my voice, because I glory in the Lord.

Let troubled souls rejoice. 1 to 7, Psalm 34 to God's prayer. Amen. Thank you.