

Woe to You Legalists (Luke 11:37–54)

What Legalism Is Not

In this morning's text, Jesus confronts the scribes and the Pharisees over their false and fraudulent religion. It is interesting to note that Jesus reserved His most virulent condemnation—not for the Gentiles, nor the tax-collectors, nor the prostitutes, nor the irreligious—but for the scribes and the Pharisees. No other group in first-century Israel did Jesus call hypocrites (Mt 23:13, 23, 25, 27, 29), sons of hell (Mt 23:15), blind guides and blind fools (Mt 23:16–17), whitewashed tombs (Mt 23:27), serpents and a brood of vipers (Mt 23:33). Why? Why did the scribes and the Pharisees evoke such vehement denunciations from the Lord Jesus? Let me tell you what the answer is *not*. It is *not* that Jesus is indifferent toward sin—Jesus was not indifferent toward the idolatry of the Gentiles, nor the greed of the tax-collectors, nor the immorality of the prostitutes, nor the apathy of the irreligious. Jesus does not approve of sin, nor is He apathetic toward holiness. But Jesus abominates self-righteousness.

This is an important distinction to make at the beginning of this morning's message, because legalism is a label that is frequently (mis)applied to any concern for holiness. Thus, a Christian teenager who refuses to engage in sexual activity is called a legalist. A Christian employee who refuses to fudge on the billing accounts is called a legalist. A Christian friend who refuses to gossip, or attend a movie with sexual or blasphemous content, is called a legalist. Or, a Christian who refuses to engage even in something that is a matter of conscience and Christian liberty (like the use of tobacco or the consumption of alcohol) is called a legalist. Frequently, anyone whose standards are stricter than mine is labeled a legalist. But none of these is legalism. A concern for holiness is not legalism. A tender conscience is not legalism. Sexual purity is not legalism. Personal integrity is not legalism. The pursuit of righteousness in one's conversation and conduct is not legalism. Ashley and I allowed our children to read the *Harry Potter* books. Other parents have not allowed their children to read these books out of a concern that it could normalize witchcraft and occultism. Such a restriction is not legalism... unless or until it goes further and adopts a particular posture toward God and men. As, for instance, when one couple many years ago decided that I could not possibly be qualified to be their pastor and left the church because my then-seven-year-old son Benjamin dressed up as Harry Potter for Halloween.

What Legalism Is (11:37–52)

So what is legalism, and why does Jesus hate it so much? This morning we will construct a definition of legalism from Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and the Pharisees in Luke 11:37–54. But rather than wait until the end to provide this definition, I want to give it to you at the beginning. Then we will take it apart, examine the pieces, and put it back together again. Here, then, is my definition of legalism: *Legalism is the attempt to establish one's own righteousness before God and man through external works of the law accomplished in power of the flesh. It is born of pride, motivated by praise, and destined for punishment.* With that basic definition, let's work through the seven woes that Jesus pronounced upon the Pharisees and the scribes/lawyers (νομικοί) in this passage in order to add color and depth to this definition. (Technically, there are only six “woes” [vv. 42, 43, 44, 46, 47, 52], but vv. 39–41 function as a woe, and Jesus referred to the Pharisees as “you fools” [ἄφρονες], which amounts to the same thing.¹)

Let's start, however, with the context in which Jesus made His pronouncement:

While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. (11:37–38)

The confrontation took place at an afternoon banquet (ἀριστήση indicates an early afternoon meal rather than an evening dinner).² A Pharisee, evidently in attendance while Jesus was teaching the crowds (v. 29) and ministering (v. 14), immediately asked Jesus (perhaps even interrupted Jesus' teaching—the Greek is emphatic that it was while Jesus was in the act of speaking that he issued the invitation [ἐν δὲ τῷ λαλῆσαι] to dine with him). Jesus accepted the invitation, walked to the man's house, entered within and reclined at table. So far so good, right? Wrong. Jesus failed to “first wash before dinner” (οὐ πρῶτον ἐβαπτίσθη πρὸ τοῦ ἀρίστου).

¹ Edwards, Garland, and Morris all view vv. 39–41 as an introductory rebuke, followed by three woes upon the Pharisees (vv. 42–44) and three woes upon the lawyers (vv. 46–52): James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 355–360; David E. Garland, *Luke*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 490–92; Leon Morris, *Luke*, TNTC (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1988), 220–25. But as there was an overlap between Pharisees and scribes, I see no reason not to combine the denunciations into a single condemnation of legalism.

² Edwards, 354.

This caused the Pharisee to “marvel” (ἐθαύμασεν), but not in a good way. He was shocked and appalled by Jesus’ neglect. The offense had nothing to do with hygiene. The Pharisee did not know anything about germ theory. He was not thinking about how many hands Jesus had touched, or where those hands had been. The issue was one of ritual purity. According to the Mosaic law, such washing was only necessary if one had touched a bodily discharge (Lv 15:11), but rabbinic tradition had expanded this requirement to include washings every time one ate—again, not out of a concern for hygiene, but because the world outside was so defiled by Gentiles and less-observant Jews.³ And Jesus would surely have come into contact with such defiled and unclean people, surrounded as He was by crowds. Therefore, any *real* rabbi (like the Pharisee, for instance) would have ceremonially washed prior to entering his home and reclining at table.⁴ American rabbi Jacob Neusner helps us understand this issue of ritual impurity, writing,

If you touch a reptile, you may not be dirty, but you are unclean. If you undergo a ritual immersion, you may not be free of dirt, but you are clean. A corpse can make you unclean, though it may not make you dirty. A rite of purification involving the sprinkling of water mixed with the ashes of a red heifer probably will not remove a great deal of dirt, but it will remove the impurity.⁵

According to another Jewish scholar, “Impurity can flow from one object to another, from food to body and then again to other food, and it can pass through many stages before dying out.”⁶ The Mishnah was explicit on this point. Mishnah tractate *Yoma* 2:2 states, “If his hands were dirty all becomes unclean.” And Talmud tractate *Sotah* 4b suggests that eating bread with unwashed hands is as defiling as intercourse with a prostitute.⁷ For Jesus to enter into the Pharisee’s home and to eat with unwashed hands was a grave violation of rabbinic tradition, would be seen as having defiled the house and all in it, and was irrefutable evidence that Jesus

³ Edwards, 354. Garland writes, “Only priests, however, are commanded to wash hands (Exod 30:19–21); see 40:12);” Garland, 493.

⁴ “Jesus’ involvement with unclean crowds and his failure to wash before eating would have been particularly offensive to a Pharisee”; Edwards, 354.

⁵ Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism*, SLJA 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 1; quoted in Edwards, 354.

⁶ Yair Furstenberg, “Defilement Penetrating the Body: A New Understanding of Contamination in Mark 7:15,” *NTS* 54 (2008):188; quoted in Garland, 493.

⁷ The citations from the Mishnah and the Talmud are found in Garland, 493. “The quantity of water and the manner of washing are prescribed in minute detail in the Mishnah (*Yadaim* 1:1ff)”; Morris, 221.

was a lawbreaker and therefore could not be the Messiah. This was the context in which Jesus pronounced the seven woes found in today's passage. Let's work through them one at a time.

I. Legalism Emphasizes the External to the Neglect of the Internal

The first characteristic of legalism that provokes Jesus to wrath is that it emphasizes the external to the neglect of the internal. Legalism defines holiness by external standards alone.

And the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you." (11:39–41)

This first characteristic is really the foundation of all legalism. Legalism is concerned with only with actions, not with affections. Therefore, if the actions are right, a person is holy. In this way, the Pharisees convinced themselves that they were righteous before God because they gave fastidious attention to the external requirements of the law; yet they neglected to see that the law requires not only external actions but internal affections. As this first characteristic is foundational to our understanding not only of legalism (which is a fraudulent righteousness) but also of holiness (= authentic righteousness), let's camp out here for a few minutes. I want to make four comments on vv. 39–41.

First, note that the external command which the Pharisees kept and Jesus violated is not even a commandment of God. There is no scriptural command to wash one's hands if one touches a Gentile, or a non-observant Jew, or even a defiled person. Only priests ministering in the tabernacle/temple (Ex 30:19–21; 40:12) or those defiled by a bodily discharge (Leviticus 15) were commanded to wash. This was a tradition of man, not a commandment of God. I could have added this to the list as an eighth characteristic of legalism, but Jesus did not address it here in Luke 11, so I'll just mention it under this first point. But elsewhere in his interactions with the Pharisees, Jesus condemned them for inventing new laws by which they included themselves among the holy and excluded others. In Mark 7 (see also Matthew 15), Jesus found Himself in a similar circumstance when the scribes and the Pharisees fussed at Him because His disciples ate with unwashed hands. Listen to how Jesus responded on that occasion:

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

*““This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.””*

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” (Mk 7:1–7)

Legalism inevitably invents rules and regulations that erect artificial boundaries around holiness, boundaries that conveniently fence themselves in and keep others out. Philip Ryken warns against this tendency:

As Christians we need to learn to tell the difference between the law of God and our own personal preferences. We may have all kinds of opinions about things like what people ought to wear, what they should eat, how they should run their household, how they should spend their money, what priorities they should have in ministry, or what political position they ought to take. Some of these opinions may be strongly held. We may even believe that there are good spiritual reasons for our opinions. The Pharisees certainly had spiritual reasons for thinking that Jesus should wash his hands. But are we properly distinguishing between the commands of God and our own code of conduct? When we

get offended, we need to make sure it is only for things that God himself truly finds offensive, instead of just pontificating on the basis of our own opinions.⁸

I am not suggesting that this is easy. We often define a biblical position as that which is drawn from explicit precept or by good and necessary inference from the biblical text. While we can usually agree on what constitutes an explicit precept, there is not always agreement on what constitutes a good and necessary inference or a specific application of a general principle. It is sometimes be hard to define the application of biblical principles for myself, let alone for an entire church. For example, everyone agrees that Christians are commanded to raise their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). Some feel that a necessary inference from this principle is that Christian parents should not send their children to public schools; others think that it is possible to fulfill this command while still sending their children to public schools. Legalism takes my particular understanding of the necessary inference and elevates it to the level of explicit precept, and then proceeds to evaluate my own or another's holiness on that basis... as when Doug Wilson said in a video posted on X last November that for Christian parents to send their children to government schools was sin.⁹ So how do parents with differing views on the application of Ephesians 6:4 avoid legalism? With a strong doctrine of *sola Scriptura* and a healthy dose of love. The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* says that Scripture alone is a sufficient standard of righteousness, that Scripture alone defines what is and is not sin, that Scripture alone has the authority to bind the conscience. Furthermore, the entire law is summed up in the command to love your neighbor as yourself (Rom 13:9). Love is like the caulk that seals the gap between my application of a biblical principle and yours. First Baptist Nixa, we must take great care not elevate the traditions of men to the level of commandments of God, and then evaluate our own or another's righteousness upon that basis.

Second, note that external actions can conceal evil affections. This is the point of Jesus' analogy of the cup and the dish that are clean on the outside but filthy on the inside. The Pharisees appeared righteous to all outside observers, especially as they saw the care the Pharisees took to cleanse themselves from defilement through ritual washings. But Jesus, who

⁸ Philip Ryken, *Luke, Volume 1: Luke 1–12*, REC (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 620–21.

⁹ <https://x.com/douglaswils/status/1994462326293217566?s=20>. See Owen Strachan's response; Owen Strachan, "Doug Wilson vs. Public Schools: On the Freedom of the Gospel," December 1, 2025; <https://owenstrachan.substack.com/p/doug-wilson-vs-public-schools-on>.

knows the heart, said that inwardly they were full of “greed and wickedness” (ἀρπαγῆς καὶ πονηρίας). In Luke 16, after recording Jesus’ teaching about how no servant can serve two masters, and neither can man serve both God and money (16:13), Luke wrote, “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him” (16:14). In Luke 20:47, Jesus said that the scribes “devour widow’s houses,” a reference to unscrupulous teachers who convinced widows to make exorbitant donations to them (not unlike the televangelists of the previous generation). The point is that no one in Jesus’ day appeared more righteous, more observant, or more holy... yet this righteous façade masked a corrupt soul. Any unregenerate scoundrel can wash his hands before he eats. But only the regenerate, in whom the Spirit of God dwells, can love God supremely and others selflessly. In Matthew 23:27–28, Jesus said,

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Mt 23:27–28)

The whitewash on the outside of the tombs are the external actions; the dead bones on the inside are the internal affections. Thus, the Pharisees (both ancient and modern) are careful to cultivate the external appearance of righteousness, but their affections are evil—they are “full of greed and wickedness.”

Third, note that as God created us with a body *and* soul, outward *and* inward, distinct yet indivisible, so holiness is both external *and* internal. “You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? (11:40). How could the Pharisees imagine that God would be pleased with external actions devoid of internal affections? God created both the body and the soul, and He demands honor and glory from both the actions of our body and the affections of our soul. The washing of the body does not compensate for the filth of the soul.

Fourth, note that the biblical process of sanctification addresses affections first, then actions. “But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you” (11:41). “Give as alms those things that are within” (τὰ ἐνόντα δότε ἐλεημοσύνην) is a difficult expression that is probably colloquial—in other words, it was an idiomatic expression that was

clear in Jesus' day, but not in ours.¹⁰ There are two primary ways in which it could be understood. "Give as alms" could be literal, in which case it would mean something like, "Give alms to counteract the things that are inside (i.e. greed and wickedness), and you will be thoroughly clean." This would be similar to the instructions that Jesus gave the rich, young ruler in Luke 18:22. Or, "give as alms" could be a metaphor, in which case it would mean something like, "Offer to God an obedience that comes from within, and you will be thoroughly clean—both inside and out." I lean toward the second explanation; in either case, Jesus' point is clear. External adherence to rules does not make one clean before God. But if you focus first upon the internal affections, the external actions will follow, for we always act in accordance with our affections. In Matthew 12, speaking again to the Pharisees, Jesus put it this way:

"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil. For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil." (Mt 12:33–35)

If you want to purify the stream, you must first purify the spring.

The point of vv. 39–41 is that God defines holiness as righteous actions flowing from righteous affections. You cannot leave out the affections in the pursuit of holiness; indeed, you must begin with the affections, and this puts holiness entirely out of the reach of human attainment. As I said before, any unregenerate scoundrel can wash his hands before he eats (or perform any outward act of righteousness). But only the regenerate, in whom the Spirit of God dwells in power, can love God supremely and his neighbor selflessly (which is the fulfillment of the law). This, of course, points us to the fundamental biblical truth that you must be born again

¹⁰ "The phrase 'give alms' (NIV 'be generous to the poor') is a Hebraism, and the juxtaposition of words in the first part of v. 41 without showing their syntactic relationship to each other suggests Hebraic influence as well. The Hebraic character of the verse may help explain its meaning. The LXX translators regularly chose to translate *tsedaqah*, the important Hebrew word for 'righteousness' and/or 'justice,' with the Greek word for 'alms,' *eleēmosynē*. Giving to the poor, in other words, was at the core of God's will for justice in the world. The Hebraism 'give alms' seems to signify something similar in v. 41"; Edwards, 355. "'From what is inside' (τὰ ἐνόντα) is difficult and can be understood as an accusative of respect, 'in connection with what is inside'; Garland, 494. Garland notes the connection in Acts 10:2, 15 and 11:9 between giving alms and being clean. See Bishop Ryle's comments on this phrase, which correspond closely to the interpretation offered here; J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke, Volume 2* (1858; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2012), 36.

if you would enter into the kingdom of heaven (Jn 3:3, 5). Legalists neglect this truth, focusing only upon the external action while neglecting the internal affections—cleaning the outside of the cup and dish whilst the inside remains filthy and defiled. How foolish to imagine that immersing your hands in water could make you righteous before God, when your heart is full of greed and wickedness...

II. Legalism Focuses upon the Periphery to the Neglect of the Center

The second characteristic of legalism that provokes Jesus to wrath is that it focuses upon the periphery of the law while neglecting the center of biblical revelation. Sometimes this characteristic is described as keeping the letter of the law while neglecting the spirit of the law.

“But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” (11:42)

The Israelites were commanded to tithe “all the yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year” (Dt 14:22) for the support of priests and Levites, as well as foreigners, the fatherless, and widows (Dt 14:28–29).¹¹ The problem, according to Jesus, was not that they were scrupulous about their tithe; the problem was that they were scrupulous about their tithe and imagined they were righteous thereby, while utterly neglecting the central features of the law, like showing justice and mercy. When asked which was the great commandment in the law, Jesus said the law was summed up in the commands to love God supremely and love your neighbor selflessly (Mt 22:34–40). He did not say, “Tithe your mint, rue, and every herb; on this depends all the Law and the Prophets.” When the prophet Micah summarized what the LORD requires, he said,

*He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Mi 6:8)*

¹¹ Edwards, 356.

Micah did not say, “And what does the LORD require of you, but to tithe your mint, rue, and every herb?” Why? Because tithing was peripheral to the law—a means of supporting the ministry and mercy framework of Israel. But justice and love are central to the character of God, and must therefore be central to the character of God’s people. The Pharisees were hateful, selfish, greedy scoundrels... but they tithed.

Even so, it is still possible today to tithe and yet be bitter, selfish, and indifferent to suffering... but you cannot be bitter, selfish, or indifferent and yet be a Christian. Therefore, tithing must not be near to the center of the Christian faith. The justice and love of God is the epicenter of true faith (Mic 6:8; Jas 1:27). Legalism takes a peripheral issue of the Christian faith—not *unimportant*, just not *all-important*; Jesus said, “These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” —and makes it a central issue, then proceeds to argue for it in harsh, hateful, unkind ways while making it the dividing line demarcating the holy from the unholy. This happens frequently on social media. (While I’m at it—and this is for free—gentleness and kindness are not evidences of an effeminate Christianity to be mocked; they are fruits of the Spirit to be cultivated. There is a worrying trend among evangelicals that confuses being mean with being masculine, being crude with being courageous, and being kind with being cowardly. Reject this trend, walk by the Spirit, and bear the Spirit’s fruits.) If we would avoid legalism at First Baptist Nixa, we must fight hard to keep the main thing the main thing, and not move peripheral issues to the center.

III. Legalism Seeks the Praise of Men Rather than the Praise of God

The third characteristic of legalism that provokes Jesus to wrath is that it seeks the praise of man rather than the praise of God.

“Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.” (11:43)

Legalists both ancient and modern love being seen and spoken of as holy. They live on the praise of men. It was this motive in the Pharisees that Jesus condemned in Matthew 6, in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, the main of point of which was to differentiate true righteousness from the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees (Mt 5:20):

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. . . . And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. . . . And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.” (Mt 6:1–2, 5, 16)

According to Jesus, the underlying motive of the religious activities of the scribes and the Pharisees was the praise of men. This is what they loved; this is what they craved. And tragically, this is what kept some of them, who were convinced that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, from publicly identifying with Him:

Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. (Jn 12:42–43)

What a tragically foolish exchange—to trade the everlasting praise of the immortal God for the fleeting praise of mortal men.

IV. Legalism Secretly Defiles Those Under Its Influence

The fourth characteristic of legalism that provokes Jesus to wrath is that it secretly defiles those under its influence.

“Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it.” (11:44)

Under the Mosaic law, contact with a corpse, or even contact with a grave, defiled a person for seven days (Lv 21:1–4, 11; Num 19:11–22). For this reason, it was customary in Israel to

whitewash tombs every spring so people would not unknowingly come into contact with them.¹² In Matthew 23:27–28, Jesus compared the Pharisees to whitewashed tombs that outwardly appear beautiful and clean, but inwardly were dead and defiled. In Luke 11:44, Jesus used the opposite analogy, referring to the Pharisees as unmarked tombs with which people come into contact and are unknowingly defiled. The legalist, in his concern for holiness, initially sounds right and true to the tender conscience that desires holiness; but before the person knows it, the teaching has taken root, corrupting the gospel and defiling the soul.

We have a ready example of this contagious, corrupting influence in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Less than a year after Paul left the Galatian churches, having firmly established them upon the foundation of the gospel of justification by the blood and righteousness of Christ alone and sanctification by the power of the Spirit of Christ alone, Judaizers (essentially, Christian legalists) had infiltrated these churches with a pseudo-gospel of justification by Christ *and* circumcision and sanctification by the work of the Spirit *and* the works of the law. Paul responded with the strongest possible language:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel. . . . O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? (Gal 1:6; 3:1)

As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (Gal 1:9)

Note carefully that the Galatian Christians had not abandoned grace, faith, or Christ. They still believed in the necessity of all three. But, under the influence of legalism, they had added merit to grace, works to faith, and circumcision to Christ. And Paul wondered aloud whether they had actually been converted.

I am afraid I have labored over you in vain. . . . You are severed from Christ, you would who be justified by the law; you have fallen from grace. (Gal 4:11; 5:4)

¹² Edwards, 357.

Do not underestimate the subtle seduction of legalism. It is deadly, it is defiling, and it is deceptive.

V. Legalism Judges Others More Strictly than Itself

The fifth characteristic of legalism that provokes Jesus to wrath is that it judges others more strictly than itself. Legalists employ a sliding standard that always seems to include themselves among the holy while excluding others. In vv. 45–52, Jesus addressed a separate yet related group (“lawyers” [νομικοί], also called “scribes” [γραμματεῖς]) who were infected by the same disease of legalism.

One of the lawyers answered him, “Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also.” And he said, “Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.” (11:45–46)

The first part of Jesus’ condemnation in v. 46 is fairly straightforward—by all of their additions and accretions, the scribes had loaded the law with traditions that made it an intolerable burden for the people of God. Leon Morris gives an example from the Mishnah tractate dealing with the Sabbath.

On the sabbath, they taught, a man may not carry a burden “in his right hand or in his left hand, in his bosom or on his shoulder.” But he may carry it “on the back of his hand, or with his foot or with his mouth or with his elbow, or in his ear or in his hair or in his wallet (carried) mouth downwards, or between his wallet and his shirt, or in the hem of his shirt, or in his shoe or in his sandal” (*m. Shabbath* 10:3). Multiply this by all the regulations of the Law and ordinary people have a burden beyond bearing even to know what they might do and might not do.¹³

The effect of all of these accretions to the law was that they distracted people from the point of the law—generally speaking, to love God and love neighbor; specific to the Sabbath law, to

¹³ Morris, 224.

dedicate the day to God for rest and worship.¹⁴ You could not rest and worship if you spent the entire Sabbath trying to figure out whether a particular act was lawful or unlawful.

The second part of Jesus' condemnation— "and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers" —is more difficult to interpret. It could mean one of two things. It could mean that the scribes demanded fastidious adherence to the law, but offered no power to keep the law, because it is only by grace, through faith, in the power of the Spirit that sinners can keep the law from the heart. Or it could mean that the scribes, who constructed all of these abstruse rules also constructed loopholes for themselves that kept them easily within the bounds of the "holy," while the common people struggled to attain a standard they could never fulfill. This is Morris' stance, who wrote, "But there is a multitude of loopholes for a lawyer who knew the traditions which enabled him to do pretty well what he wished."¹⁵ Edwards attempts to tie both interpretations together, writing, "Teachers must not only inform people, they must aid people. They must show people what to do, but also support them in doing it—and above all, attempt to live by it *themselves*."¹⁶

All of these additions and accretions, of course, missed the point of the law, which according to the apostle Paul (Rom 3:19–21; Gal 3:21–24) was to reveal to man his sin, lead him to despair of his own righteousness, and drive him to Christ, in whom he may be justified by faith. And then, having been justified by faith in Christ and indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, the law reveals to us the will of God that we may live to His glory and our joy. Legalism, for all of its concern for the law, misses the point of the law.

VI. Legalism Destroys the Prophets and Apostles

The sixth characteristic of legalism that provokes Jesus to wrath is that it destroys the prophets and the apostles.

"Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and

¹⁴ Ryken, 633.

¹⁵ Morris, 224. See also Ryken, 634.

¹⁶ Edwards, 358.

apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute, 'so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation.' (11:47–51)

Building tombs to honor great men was an important part of Jewish tradition.¹⁷ But this was not the issue that so irked Jesus. Rather, it was the hypocrisy of building tombs and monuments to honor the very prophets whom their ancestors (not merely physically, but spiritually; not merely biologically, but theologically) had killed. The major prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah were killed by the Jews, as well as minor prophets like Zechariah (2 Chr 24:20–22) and Uriah (Jer 26:20–23), and who knows how many others whose names are not recorded in Scripture (cf. 1 Kgs 19:10). While these prophets were still alive, they were hated. But after they were killed, the Pharisees and their ancestors co-opted their memory, corrupted their words, and claimed them as their own.

The whole of Scripture (this is the meaning of “the wisdom of God” in v. 49¹⁸) testifies to the truth that God sent prophet after prophet, and apostle after apostle (think of the sending of the twelve [9:1–6], and the sending of the seventy-two [10:1–16]), to Israel, and they were rejected. Some were persecuted; other were killed. But all of this rejection, all of this rebellion, was about to reach a climax in the murder of the Son of God, such that “this generation” (the generation that murdered the Messiah) would be held accountable for all of the previous murders of God’s messengers leading up to this moment, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was murdered between the altar and the sanctuary.¹⁹ Why? Because this generation had all of the previous revelation from which to learn, yet it ignored it and repeated the same sin. The scribes and Pharisees read from the time they were young of how their ancestors had murdered the prophets, yet they ignored it and murdered the Messiah, all the while pretending that they were more righteous than their ancestors. One thinks of the chilling response of the crowds when

¹⁷ Edwards, 358.

¹⁸ “Scripture as a whole delivers the same verdict, for the reference to the ‘wisdom of God’ (v. 49; NIV ‘God in his wisdom’), according to its only other reference in the Hebrew and Greek Bible (Ezra 7:25), is a circumlocution for Torah, Scripture. In asserting that ‘the wisdom of God’ tells the story of the persecution of the prophets, Jesus implies that *all* Scripture testifies that the history of the world is one of violence against the messengers of God, for which each generation is responsible”; Edwards, 359.

¹⁹ There is debate about the identity of Zechariah, especially in light of Matthew 23:35. For a brief commentary on the possible solutions, see D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 8, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 485–86.

Pilate attempted to release Jesus and they refused, shouting, “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Mt 27:25).²⁰ Ryken notes, “All the prophets testified about Jesus. So when the lawyers killed Jesus, they were in murderous rebellion against all the prophets of God.”²¹

What did the prophets of old do? They condemned the sin and self-righteousness of Israel, and Israel hated them for it. Even so, legalists of today hate those who expose their sin and self-righteousness. And though they may not kill them (at least not in America), they denounce them and seek to discredit and disgrace them. Legalists hate to have their sin exposed and their self-righteousness examined, and they will rage against all who attempt it.

VII. Legalism Excludes Its Adherents from the Kingdom of God

The final characteristic of legalism that provokes Jesus to wrath is that it excludes its adherents from the kingdom of God. Legalism cannot save, because it isn’t the gospel.

“Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. For you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.” (11:52)

The “knowledge” of which Jesus spoke is the saving knowledge of God; the “key of knowledge,” then, is the proper interpretation of Scripture that unlocks that saving knowledge.²² According to Leon Morris, “Instead of opening up the treasures of knowledge, the lawyers closed them fast. They turned the Bible into a book of obscurities, a bundle of riddles which only the experts could understand.”²³

So what is the key of knowledge that unlocks the meaning of Scripture and enables people to enter into the saving knowledge of God? It is justification through faith in Christ alone.²⁴ Let me show you what I mean. In John 5 Jesus told the Jewish leaders,

²⁰ Ryken, 637.

²¹ Ryken, 638.

²² “The lawyers professed to expound the meaning of the Law and thus to be the teachers of the people, but in fact they have taken away the key of knowledge, i.e. the key that unlocks the meaning of Scripture and brings people to the knowledge of God”; Morris, 225.

²³ Morris, 225.

²⁴ “So what *is* the key of knowledge, the secret that unlocks the mysteries of salvation? Jesus Christ is the key, just as he is the way, and the truth, and the life. The key to saving knowledge is the grace that God offers to guilty sinners through Jesus Christ. The way to be saved—the way to have eternal life—is not by works of our own obedience. Rather, it is to confess our sins and put our trust in Christ alone for our salvation. As Cyril of Alexandria said in one of the first commentaries on the Gospel of Luke, the key of knowledge is ‘justification in Christ’”;

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”
(Jn 5:39–40)

According to Jesus, the entire OT bears witness to Him, and to the truth that eternal life is found in Him. In Luke 24, Jesus told the two men on the road to Emmaus,

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Lk 24:25–27)

According to Jesus, Moses and all the Prophets testify to the necessity of the suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and it is foolishness and slowness of heart to not see this in the pages of the OT. According to Paul, the Law and the Prophets testify to justification by faith in Christ apart from works of the law:

But now, the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (Rom 3:21–25a)

And Paul told the Jewish King Agrippa and all in attendance in Caesarea,

“I stand here testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to

Ryken, 639, citing Cyril of Alexandria, “Commentary on Luke,” in *Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just, Jr., Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, NT 3 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 202.

rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”
(Acts 26:22–23)

Do you see? The key that unlocks the meaning of the entire Scriptures, the key that unlocks the knowledge of God, the key that opens the doors of the kingdom of God, is justification through faith alone in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The scribes and the Pharisees took away this key, thus preventing the people of Israel from entering into this saving knowledge. I do not want to make the same mistake. So let me take the key of Christ and with it unlock the Scriptures, the door of the knowledge of God, the door to the kingdom of God, and invite everyone in attendance this morning to enter. We are sinners, corrupt to the core and condemned under the law. Therefore, salvation is not to be found in the way of self-righteousness (we have none) or by works of the law (we cannot accomplish them). We are bad trees by birth; and bad trees can only bear bad fruit (Mt 7:17–18). But God has come in Christ to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. By His incarnation, Christ became our representative under the law. By His righteousness, Christ has satisfied the demands of the law on our behalf. By His blood, Christ has satisfied the penalty of the law in our place. And by His resurrection, Christ has defeated death and gives eternal life to those who will come to Him for righteousness and salvation rather than attempting to establish their own righteousness and carve out their own salvation. Legalism says, “God justifies the righteous.” The gospel says, “God justifies the ungodly through the righteousness of Christ.”

Where Legalism Leads (11:53–54)

Finally, Luke concludes this story by showing us where legalism leads, and ironically, it is not to the love of God and man, which would have been the fulfillment of the law—i.e. holiness.

As he went away from there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say. (11:53–54)

Where does legalism lead? It leads to the hatred of Jesus.²⁵ Why? Because Jesus will not abide self-righteousness. There is no hope in legalism, the religion of the scribes and the Pharisees. So guard your heart and your doctrine carefully. Remember the definition of legalism given in the introduction—*Legalism is the attempt to establish one's own righteousness before God and man through external works of the law accomplished in power of the flesh. It is born of pride, motivated by praise, and destined for punishment.* Learn to recognize legalism in yourself and others, and then avoid it like the plague. Receive and rest in the righteousness of Christ through faith.

²⁵ “Not surprisingly, the scribes and the Pharisees do not appreciate this tirade directed against them. If they are anything like Paul (see Phil 3:5–6), they knocked themselves out trying to be righteous. Jesus challenges nearly everything that they have built their religious lives around, and it sparks a knee-jerk reaction of bearing a grudge against their detractor that will not be satisfied until he bears a cross”; Garland, 497.