



What Legalists Do

Matthew 12:1-8

1. They Search for Sin (verses 1-2).
2. They Mishandle the Scripture (verses 3-5).
3. They Disregard the Messiah (verses 6, 8).
4. They Neglect Mercy (verse 7).

As many of you know, my father is reaching the age of retirement. He is battling in his mind what exactly to do with the "rest of his life." Recently, I gave my father a few tapes, which addressed the issue of how Christians ought never to "retire." The speaker on the tape suggested that if Christians have reached a point financially where they can be self-supporting, they can be a tremendous asset to the church of Jesus Christ, perhaps as missionaries or elders or other Christian work. At one point the exhortation was clear as a bell. The man said, "Don't die on a golf course in New Mexico or Florida." My dad said, "Steve, I listened to the tapes you gave me. Don't worry, I won't die on a golf course in New Mexico or Florida. We have a place in Arizona, remember?" Of course, he was joking. But this illustrates a point that I want to address this morning: getting the letter right, but missing the true spirit.

In our exposition through the book of Matthew, we have come to Matthew 12, where a group of legalists attack Jesus and His disciples. Their fundamental problem is that they focus too much on the letter of the law and miss the spirit of it entirely. Rather than place their attention on the great truths that Jesus was teaching (for instance, in the Sermon on the Mount), they focus instead upon tiny transgressions of their law-code. They transform these tiny transgressions into major issues. The attack that the legalists bring upon Jesus in Matthew 12 concerns a very minor issue.

Let me illustrate just how minor this issue was. Sundays are busy days for me. In fact, I never have breakfast on Sunday morning before Church. I usually drink a half a glass of water or apple juice. Sometimes I'll eat a few bites of bread. But, that's about all that my stomach can take. And sometimes, as I am about to preach, my stomach starts growling, especially as I smell some of the food that we often enjoy in potlucks after the service. Now, suppose that I take this granola bar and unwrap it and eat it. It would taste pretty good and it would give me a bit of additional energy to preach.

This is what the disciples of Jesus did on the Sabbath Day: They prepared and ate some granola. The Pharisees saw this and were up in arms; they were fuming! They said, "How dare the disciples of Jesus pick grain and eat in on the Sabbath!" We might perceive that eating a granola bar on Sunday is a minor thing. But, in the mind of a legalist, any issue is a major issue. They looked past all of Jesus' teaching, and focused on this minor issue instead.

I am entitling my sermon, "What Legalists Do." The reason that the Pharisees resist Jesus in these eight verses is because they are legalists. When I talk about a legalist, I am simply talking about one who pays so much attention to the letter of the law, that they miss the spirit of the law. In so doing, they sin, often without realizing it.

All of us have legalistic tendencies. We all have our own standards, which we expect others to live by. When others don't, we mark them out as transgressors. Perhaps we even let the world know about their unrighteousness. As we go through "What Legalists Do," I want you to examine your own heart to see if you do these things, and then confess it as sin before the Lord. We will look at four things that legalists do.

1. They Search for Sin (verses 1-2)

Let's pick up the story in verse 1,

"At that time Jesus went on the Sabbath through the grainfields, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat." (Matt. 12:1)

We are told several things in this verse:

1. Jesus was with His disciples. This was nothing new. Jesus had called His disciples to follow Him, to be with Him and to learn from Him. We read in Mark 3:14 that Jesus "appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach."

2. It was the Sabbath day. For the Jews, this was the day given to them by God for a day of rest. The word "Sabbath" is a Hebrew word meaning "rest" (see Ex. 20:8-10). God created the world in 6 days and rested on the seventh day. Likewise, He commanded Israel to do the same. Work six days and rest (or Shabat) on the seventh day which is Saturday. For the Jews, Saturday was to be a day of great joy. They would come to the temple and pray. They would attend religious services in the synagogues. They would rest after a week of hard labor.

3. Jesus' disciples became hungry. We might have expected this to occur. When the gospel writers tell us about Jesus and His ministry, we are often confronted with the fact that the ministry of Jesus was entirely consuming. At times, Jesus had nothing to eat for long periods of

time. On two different occasions, Mark tells us that Jesus and His disciples were so busy ministering to the needs of many people that "they could not even eat a meal" (Mark 3:20; 6:31). At one point, Jesus told His disciples, "come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). We can conjecture that Jesus and His disciples were again busy ministering to people, which caused them to hunger. Perhaps they had just come from a local synagogue. Perhaps they had just come home from a preaching tour. At any rate, they became hungry and decided to eat.

4. They took grain from the field and ate it. To us, this sounds like a strange thing. If we are hungry during our travels, we don't stop the car and go into the cornfields and begin shucking the corn to grab a bite to eat. We don't say, "Hey, there's a garden, let's look for some tomatoes to eat." We don't take apples from the apple tree in our neighbor's yard. This would be considered stealing in our day. But in Jesus' day, this was permitted according to the law. Deuteronomy 23:25 says, "When you enter your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor's standing grain." What Jesus and His disciples were doing was permitted according to the law. You could go into your neighbor's field and take the wheat and sift it in your hands and have a bite of granola. However, it was prohibited for you to take along your Tupperware container and fill it up to take home for later use. Deuteronomy 23:24 says, "When you enter your neighbor's vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you are fully satisfied, but you shall not put any in your basket." These laws were an expression of love and favor toward those in need at the moment. They were consistent with the laws of not reaping to the corners of your fields, nor gathering the gleanings of the harvest, but to leave them for the needy (Lev. 23:22).

In verse 2, we find the Pharisees searching for sin.

"But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, 'Behold, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.'" (Matt. 12:2)

When Jesus' disciples took and ate this grain, it was not as if they were all alone, retreating from the crowds. In fact, the crowds were nearby. And the Pharisees in the crowds were close enough to see what they were doing. They saw Jesus' disciples pick the grain, rub it in their hands, blow away the chaff and eat it. These actions were permitted according to the law. But, the Pharisees thought you could not do such things on the Sabbath! They quickly brought the matter before Jesus. They were searching for sin, looking intently for any sign of it much like birdwatchers search for birds. Now that they found it, they were sure to make it known. These Pharisees had certainly ignored some of Jesus' great teaching. As Jesus walked along side of the road with a crowd around Him, He was often teaching them. Perhaps these Pharisees had just heard Jesus preach in the synagogue and had followed him on His journey home. But, when they found a sin, they were sure to point it out and to make it known.

Picture with me your car ride home from church this morning. You ask your spouse, "So, what did you think of Steve's sermon?" (I know that some of you have this conversations). Now, suppose that your spouse says, "I can't believe he ate a granola bar in front of all of us!" You might so focus your attention upon my manners, that you forget the entire thrust of my message against legalism. That's an example of someone missing the spirit of the message to focus on my sin!

With respect to the Sabbath, the Jewish Rabbis had listed 39 activities that were prohibited on the Sabbath. The official definition of work is defined by the Talmud which was the official Rabbinical teaching of Jesus' day. They define work as,

"The primary labours are forty less one, [viz.:] sowing, ploughing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, bleaching, hackling, dyeing, spinning, stretching the threads, the making of two meshes, weaving two threads, dividing two threads, tying [knotting] and untying, sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches, capturing a deer, slaughtering, or flaying, or salting it, curing its hide, scraping it [of its hair], cutting it up, writing two letters, erasing in order to write two letters [over the erasure], building, pulling down, extinguishing, kindling, striking with a hammer, [and] carrying out from one domain to another. These are the forty primary labours less one" (Shabbath 7:2).

I read this week many pages of explanations in the Jewish Talmud of how you could decide when exactly you were sowing and reaping and baking. The Pharisees knew these teachings very well. They knew that "By plucking the grain they were guilty of reaping. By rubbing it in their hands they were guilty of threshing. By blowing off the chaff they were guilty of winnowing." (James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 205-206). So, they bring this question to Jesus, "Behold, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath" (Matt. 12:2). Legalists love to search for sin. They love seeing sin in others and pointing it out for others to see.

Recently, I had the opportunity to take a hike through some woods in the northern portion of Michigan. There was a man who came along with a GPS in hand. When he found a landmark that had been placed by the United States Government in the 1940's, he diligently recorded the GPS coordinates of the landmark. He said that he would go home and enter these coordinates onto a website which contains thousands of such items for people to hunt for. He called this geo-caching. To me it sounds like fun, searching for items when you only know the coordinates of the object.

There are those who attend Christian churches who like to hunt for sin in a similar way. They go out of their way to discover what others are doing, so that they might report it to the pastor. I know of churches where there are huge accountability structures built into the entire fabric of the church. When sin is noticed, information is communicated throughout the layers of accountability to inform them about what is taking place.

At Rock Valley Bible Church, this is not how we operate. As your pastor, I'm not on the lookout, attempting to monitor your sin. I do not often ask people if they have fulfilled a list of my expectations for their life. There are times when I have called members of this church and have received the response on the other end of the line, "Oh, uh, what have I done? Why are you calling me?" as if my job were to monitor your sin. The job of convicting people of their sin is that of the Holy Spirit. I could never do the job that the Holy Spirit does, even if I tried. Jesus

said that the Holy Spirit "will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment" (John 16:8). The Spirit uses the word of God to do this. As you come each week, and I communicate with you what the Scripture says, I trust that the Holy Spirit will convict you of your sin. As I encourage you to read your Bibles, I trust that the Holy Spirit will use the words that He inspired to transform your heart to seek Him. As I encourage you to read Spurgeon's sermons, I am trusting that God will challenge you further. As I encourage you to pray, I trust that God will search the depths of your sinful heart. And, when you hear of the great news of the gospel, that sins can be forgiven by faith in Christ, your joy will give you righteous desires to "love the Lord, your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." I'm trusting God to do His work. I don't need to be a spy, seeking to know how and when you are sinning. The Holy Spirit can do that job far better than I can. This is not to say that I ignore sin. Sin must be acknowledged and confessed for what it is. Sin must be confronted. However, I am simply saying that we are not on a witch hunt, looking out for sin. Legalists, on the other hand, are those who are on the lookout for sin. Here is another thing that legalists do. ...

2. They Mishandle the Scripture (verses 3-5).

In verses 3-5, Jesus answers their question by proposing two more questions. Each of the questions begin with the phrase, "Have you not read. have you not read" (verses 3 and 5). This would come as a stinging reproof to the Pharisees. "What do you mean, 'Have you not read?'" The Pharisees were proud that they were trained to do exactly that. They could have told Jesus, "Though many of the people cannot read, we have been trained from our youth up to read and to study the Scriptures. We study the Scriptures every day. We are the experts in the law. In the synagogues, it is us who read the Scriptures for the people! Of course we have read! We read every page of the Bible this year, and last year, and the year before that. What do you mean, 'Have you not read?'"

By using this terminology, Jesus meant that they have not understood what they have read. The path to legalism goes through the Scriptures. Legalists are often those who know much about the Bible. But, they mishandle the Scriptures. Sure, they may have read the words. Sure, they have probably memorized many verses. But, their problem comes about when they focus on one part of the Scripture, to the exclusion of another part.

I have a friend who is an engineer in the microchip industry. He supervises people who have graduated from universities with degrees in electrical engineering and mechanical engineering. These are smart people who know their math and calculus. He related to me how they will often come to him with the results of some sort of computation that they have been working on for several hours or several days. When they come to him, their answers are obviously not right. He tells them to step back and test their answers with what would appear to be a reality check. They are so immersed in the details that even though the answer obviously doesn't fit quite right with the overall problem, and they don't realize it. They are blind to it. They trust their computations, though common sense might indicate that their answer is obviously wrong. This is like what the Pharisees have done. They combed the Scripture, and picked out the details, but they have done while neglecting the message as a whole.

In the first question, Jesus emphasizes those in the law who were hungry. Jesus said,

"Have you not read what David did, when he became hungry, he and his companions; how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone?" (Matt. 2:3,4)

These verses focus on the story of David when he was fleeing for his life from Saul who was trying to kill him. The story is told in 1 Samuel 21. Let's review this story. David and Jonathan were great friends. One day David asked Jonathan, "What have I done? What is my iniquity? And what is my sin before you father, that he is seeking my life?" (1 Sam. 20:1). Jonathan said, "It is not so" (1 Sam. 20:2). They went back and forth discussing whether Saul hated David. They came up with a plan to find out the truth. They decided that David wouldn't show up for a certain feast and they would see how Saul would respond to David's absence. When Jonathan told his father Saul that David wasn't coming to the feast, Saul's anger burned against Jonathan and he said,

"As long as the son of Jesse lives on the earth, neither you nor your kingdom will be established. Therefore now, send and bring him to me, for he must surely die" (1 Sam. 20:31).

It became obvious to Jonathan and David that Saul was seeking to murder David. So Jonathan sent David off to escape. David was totally unprepared for such a flight. Thus, we pick up the story in 1 Samuel 21:1,

Then David came to Nob to Ahimelech the priest; and Ahimelech came trembling to meet David, and said to him, "Why are you alone and no one with you?" And David said to Ahimelech the priest, "The king has commissioned me with a matter, and has said to me, 'Let no one know anything about the matter on which I am sending you and with which I have commissioned you; and I have directed the young men to a certain place.' "Now therefore, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found." And the priest answered David and said, "There is no ordinary bread on hand, but there is consecrated bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women." And David answered the priest and said to him, "Surely women have been kept from us as previously when I set out and the vessels of the young men were holy, though it was an ordinary journey; how much more then today will their vessels be holy?" So the priest gave him consecrated [bread]; for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence which was removed from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread [in its place] when it was taken away. (1 Sam. 21:1-6)

It was not lawful for David to eat this bread. Leviticus 24:9 said that the consecrated bread was only for the priests. Yet, he took the show bread and ate it. It helped to sustain him in the wilderness during his first few days while fleeing from Saul. It was unlawful for David to eat, but he ate and was never condemned for his actions.

Jesus' point is this: "You Pharisees have set up such a rigid interpretation of the Scriptures, that you can't even interpret the Scripture as the Scripture itself does. Something is wrong with your approach to the law, because you can't explain David's actions in accordance with your interpretation of the law. If it was permissible for the rigid regulations to be set aside for David and his companions, then, is it not permissible for Me and My companions to eat a little grain after a day of ministry?" These Pharisees viewed the law with such rigidity that there was no room for such an exception in their minds, an exception which the Scriptures allowed. This was how they mishandled the Scripture.

In verse 5, Jesus asks another question that gets at their mishandling of the law. This time, rather than addressing the issue of eating, Jesus addresses the issue of the Sabbath. Jesus said, ...

"Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent?" (Matt. 12:5)

According to the law, the priests were required to do three things on the Sabbath:

- 1) They were to set newly baked show bread on the table every Sabbath day (Lev. 24:8).
- 2) They were to perform the Sabbath day sacrifice of "two male lambs one year old without defect, and two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil as a grain offering (Num. 28:9).
- 3) They were to perform the continual burnt offerings (Num. 28:10).

Jesus said that this constitutes a "breaking of the Sabbath." This certainly isn't rest. This is work. Jesus also said that they are "innocent." Jesus' point to the Pharisees is this: "You place such a high premium on the requirement that no one does any kind of 'work,' but you fail to see that, according to your definition, the priests are breaking the Sabbath. Something is wrong with your definition of what 'work' and 'rest.' You mishandle the Scriptures."

The Pharisees, by their meticulous interpretation of the Sabbath and through their enforcing it with an iron-handed legalism, were guilty of mishandling the Scriptures. They were so focused upon the details of their keeping of the rules, that they missed the whole point of the Sabbath in the first place. One Jewish rabbi even described the rules about the Sabbath "as mountains hanging by a hair, for Scripture is scanty and the rules are many" (M Hagigah 1:8, as quoted by D. A. Carson, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8, p. 279).

Rather than enjoying and celebrating the Sabbath day after six long, hard days of work, the Pharisees had bound up great burdens upon the backs of people. The Sabbath became a burden, not a joy to anticipate. At one point, Jesus denounced the scribes and Pharisees in that "they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger" (Matt. 23:4). I don't believe that it was an accident that this section follows Matthew 11:28, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." There are many churches around that have countless rules for you to keep. These are rules which go past the Scripture and which bind men with heavy loads. Some churches are very explicit in their rules of conduct for those involved in their church. If you transgress one of their rules, they jump all over you. But, they fail to see that Christianity isn't about keeping all of the rules, and jumping through all of the hoops, and learning to speak "Christianese" and fit in. The Pharisees had mishandled the Scripture to think that God was pleased with rule-keeping. Christianity is about Christ and His work for us on the cross. Christianity is about our response to a gracious redeemer. Christianity is about being changed by God's grace to live out God's grace. This leads us nicely to another thing that legalists do.

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3. They Disregard the Messiah (verses 6, 8).

This is found in verses 6 and 8. Let's look first at verse 6,

"I say to you, that something greater than the temple is here." (Matt. 12:6)

In verse 5, Jesus had just spoken of the priests and how they "break the Sabbath." But, they were innocent in this, because the responsibilities of the temple were greater than the restrictions of the Sabbath (verse 6). You might say it this way, "The temple was greater than the Sabbath." But now, "something greater than the temple is here." Jesus is talking about Himself. The ministry of the Messiah is more important than the temple. The ministry of the Messiah is more important than man-made Sabbath observances.

In verse 8, Jesus said the same thing, "for the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." This simply means that Jesus reigns supreme over the Sabbath, and not the other way around. Jesus was claiming His pre-eminence, His dominion, even His rule over the Law. Perhaps you remember back in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus was saying, "You have heard that it was said, ... But I say to you. ..." (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). In every way, Jesus was establishing Himself as the One who had authority over the Law, by placing His statements on equal ground with (and even surpassing) the law. The Sabbath is subject to Christ because He is over the law.

The Pharisees made Sabbath keeping a huge burden to be kept. Rather than a burden, the Sabbath was a picture pointing to the great reality of our rest in Christ. You simply need to read Hebrews 3 and 4 to see this. We find our Sabbath in Christ. The one who believes in Christ finds the true Sabbath rest (Heb. 4:3).

Legalists are often very zealous, and yet are very wrong, because they disregard the work of Jesus Christ. The emphasis quickly turns from "what Christ has done for me" to "what I have done for Christ." Perhaps the greatest example of this was the Jewish people, who had "a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God" which is found in Christ (Rom. 10:2, 3), who is the end of the law (Rom. 10:4). Before his

conversion, Paul showed his zeal in his religion by being a "persecutor of the church" (Phil. 3:6). Yet, because He was disregarding Jesus, His zeal was all misdirected. Paul was opposing the work that he was professing to advance in His zeal. He was disregarding Christ and His work! Many cults today are the same way. The cults are filled with very zealous people. The cults are filled with highly committed people. They go door to door to spread their message. They travel abroad for missions trips to spread their religion. They give tremendous amounts of money for their cause. Yet, they oppose the work that they profess to advance, because they have disregarded the Messiah. Their message is a message that is contrary to the message of Jesus. Jesus claimed to be God in the flesh, "to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Jesus was God's substitute for sin. What the blood of bulls and goats could never do, Jesus did. He took away sin, by bearing the punishment of God's wrath upon the cross in His death. He rose from the tomb in bodily form to declare His victory over sin! We are justified by faith in Him, not by our works!

If the thrust of your Biblical understanding doesn't focus upon Jesus as the Messiah, all of your Bible study has proved faulty. Jesus said to these Pharisees, "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me" (John 5:39). The Bible gives testimony to Jesus as the Messiah, who saves His people from their sins (Mat. 1:21). He does this "by grace alone through faith alone" (Eph. 2:8, 9). The Bible is a book about Him and His work to redeem His people.

Here is one final thing that legalist do. ...

4. They Neglect Mercy (verse 7)

Look at verse 7,

"But if you had known what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent." (Matt. 12:7)

What an amazing statement! The law was filled with discussion about God's requirements for the sacrifices that had to be performed. The book of Exodus contains many chapters on the specifications for the temple, where the sacrifices were to take place. Leviticus is all about the details of the sacrifices to be made. Numbers and Deuteronomy are likewise filled with many references to sacrifices. So, what does Jesus mean that God doesn't desire sacrifice? We get a clue in Psalm 51:17, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit." Also, Hosea 6:6 (from which Jesus quotes) is placing emphasis upon the priority of compassion over sacrifice. God doesn't delight in sacrifice as mere external behavior. God was looking for the broken heart and compassionate spirit to accompany the sacrifice. Without compassion, the sacrifice was detested in the eyes of God.

Again, let me remind you that Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, who prided themselves on their great Biblical knowledge and understanding. Yet, they had missed something. They had focused upon sacrifice, but had missed the place of compassion. So intent and focused were they on the letter of the law, that they missed the spirit of the law entirely. They had missed the heart of God. Legalists are often hard and condemning people. Rather than approaching people with a heart of love, they come with a big stick in their hands that will club anyone who transgresses their ways. There are many times where Christian churches act just like the Pharisees did, focusing upon sacrifice, rather than mercy. Instead of gracefully receiving the repentant sinner into their midst, they only accept those who first learn to follow their rules of conduct. Churches often have countless rules for you to keep. Many of these are derived from the Scriptures in the same way that the Sabbath observances were derived as well.

Here are a few rules that plague the church today. You must abstain from alcohol entirely. You must not smoke at all (pipes, cigarettes and cigars). You must not go to movies in the theatre. Women must wear dresses to church, but not with sandals. Men must wear suit and tie to church. You must never swim in a swimming pool with those of the opposite sex. Your children must not date others, you must practice courtship. You must home-school your children. You must send your children to a Christian school, not a public school. You must not listen to certain styles of music, because that style is of the devil. You must boycott all companies that support the homosexual agenda. You must not use the King James Version of the Bible. Boys must not have earrings. Girls must have long hair. You must not use instruments in church. It is wrong for you to go into debt for any reason. Tattoos and all forms of body piercing are wrong. This list is almost endless.

The problem isn't so much these particular items in the list. The problem is the fact that these items become binding upon individuals, as they become the focus of everything. You see someone come into the church and instantly eye them up. If they have a tattoo, they are instantly put on your bad list, because of your rules that you have established for righteousness. If they send their children to a public school, they are judged for bowing the knee to Baal. In all of this, the church has forgotten the words that Jesus quotes, "I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice." Jesus had quoted this same thing earlier in Matthew 9:13, when accused of eating with tax-gatherers and sinners. The heart of God is for sinners to come to repentance. When repentant sinners arrive in church, the people of God ought to embrace them, love them, care for them, teach them, and be patient with them as God transforms them.

Sadly, I believe that there are many today who are far more interested in the business of the church than they are with showing mercy. They want church to be a club that they can belong to. They want everybody to be living by the rule -- their rules. They want to keep the status quo. They want the pew that they can sit in. They want their entertaining show each Sunday, rather than wanting to demonstrate compassion.

Think about the example of the Pharisees. Why were they following Jesus around? Do you think that they were really trying to learn from Him? I don't think so. I think that they were trying to catch Jesus in a trap. We will see this next week when they bring a man with a withered hand to Jesus on the Sabbath, "in order that they might accuse Him" (Matt. 12:10). It was a trap. If they had truly been seeking for the welfare of Jesus and His disciples, perhaps they would have invited them into their home when they were hungry. As soon as they began to take the grain in their hands, they could have said, "Wait! Are you hungry? Here, in my bag I have a few things that I prepared yesterday that might help to nourish you." But their intent was to trap, not to help. They weren't intending compassion and love. They were coming to measure Jesus up to their own standards. As they were doing this, I'm sure that they thought that they were so righteous in their discernment of the law and the Sabbath regulations.

My mind thinks of Isaiah 1, which comes as a rebuke to such people.

Hear the word of the LORD, You rulers of Sodom; Give ear to the instruction of our God, You people of Gomorrah. (Isaiah 1:10)

These weren't really the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. When Isaiah wrote this, they had long been consumed by fire and brimstone. Rather, they were called this because of their willful involvement in sinful behavior, though outwardly appearing to be very religious. These people didn't give up on their religion. They gave up on any semblance of compassion and mercy.

"What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?" Says the LORD. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, And the fat of fed cattle. And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats. "When you come to appear before Me, Who requires of you this trampling of My courts? "Bring your worthless offerings no longer, Incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies--I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. "I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, They have become a burden to Me. I am weary of bearing them. "So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you, Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood. (Isaiah 1:11-15)

This is really quite astonishing. They were religious people doing religious things in accordance with the law of God. But with them, God was not well pleased. They were wicked people. God said, ...

"Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless; Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:16-17)

This is the heart of Jesus' words from Hosea, "I desire compassion and not sacrifice." Be compassionate, helpful, kind, and loving toward those who need your help. Often the church can be a place where people get beat up each week by the righteous Pharisee-ism of the people at church. But God says,

"Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, "Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool. (Isaiah 1:18)

This is the truth of the gospel of Christ. This is the truth of the one who is greater than the temple. This the truth of the Lord of the Sabbath. In Christ Jesus, your sins may be washed away. Though they stain deep like a blueberry stain, the blood of Christ is the strongest bleach around that can take that stain right out of the garment and make it white again, leaving no trace of stain. The message of the gospel is one of mercy received and mercy given. "I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice."

"If you consent and obey, You will eat the best of the land; "But if you refuse and rebel, You will be devoured by the sword." Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 1:19-20)

The Pharisees of Jesus' day heard the call of Christ. But they resisted it, refused it and were thence devoured. They resisted it because they were legalists. The legalists had a tendency to search for sin, mishandle Scripture, disregard the Messiah, and neglect mercy. These tendencies are ours as well. We are Bible people. There is danger in us becoming so wrapped up in what is sin and what isn't sin that we start becoming the sin police. There is a danger that we would mishandle the Scripture by being so intent upon the letter of the law that we easily miss the spirit of the law. We can be so intent on the Scripture, that we focus on tangential issues which never direct us to Christ, our Messiah. Rabbis today spend great amounts of time in the Scripture, but they miss the point. So too, we can be so interested in the Bible that we miss our response to be merciful to others. My prayer for Rock Valley Bible Church is that we would deal appropriately with sin, handle the Scripture correctly, give great honor to our Messiah, and not neglect the mercy that the world so desperately needs.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 7, 2003 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.
