

**“Legalism Blocks Love”**  
**Luke 10:38-42 & John 12:1-8**

**May 1, 2016**

**SCRIPTURE INTRO:** I’m preaching a sermon series based on a book by Paul Miller called *Love Walked Among Us*. The subtitle is *Learning to Love Like Jesus*.

What Paul Miller does, and what we’re doing, is look at a bunch of stories in the Gospels where Jesus interacts with people, and look for patterns that emerge that give us insight into how Jesus loved people.

The more stories we read, the more layers we’ll add to our understanding.

You will start to see some of the things Jesus does over and over—sometimes surprising things that he does,

And then we’ll think about how this applies to us and our interactions with people God has put in our lives.

**INTRO:** When Tobi Daum was with us a couple weeks ago, we ate lunch together and he was contrasting Germans with Americans. Tobi's a German and he lives and works in Germany as one of our missionaries, but he spent his formative years here in Cullman, graduated from CHS, and very much loves this place and loves America. One of the differences he mentioned is that Germans are sticklers for the rules. Americans are more pragmatic.

That brought to mind something that happened to Allison several years ago. She can tell it better than I can.

You can ask her for the eyewitness version after church.

But what happened was we were flying to Israel with a church tour group and we stopped in Frankfurt, Germany to change planes.

Allison and Gloria Edwards went in a women's restroom there in the terminal to freshen up and there were some sinks with a sign over them that said they were for mothers with children only.

There were no mothers with children in the restroom, the other sinks were being used, so Allison took one mothers with children sink and Gloria took another one.

Well, some German must have reported them to the authorities because suddenly in stormed a uniformed male guard, and he began pointing at the sign and shouting: Dies ist verboten! Dies ist verboten!

Allison said it was like a scene from a WWII movie with a German prison guard and a captured American soldier.

But what spoiled things for the guard was at that very moment he began shouting both the gals were brushing their teeth.

Allison said foam began pouring out of Gloria's mouth and they both began laughing hysterically and the guard stomped away in frustration.

You are breaking the rule!

Where are the women with children? I'll step aside and let them use the sink.

That's beside the point, you are breaking the rule!

I'm just brushing my teeth. I've had a long flight.

It is forbidden.

You're shouting at me. And you're a man in the women's restroom.

That's different. What you're doing, it's verboten!

Now, the poor man was just trying to do his job.

I'm sure he had to deal with obnoxious American tourists all the time.

But he is an illustration of our topic this morning.

Legalism is when you focus on a rule and forget about the person.

The rule might be a good one. The person might be wrong in breaking it. But you use that rule as a weapon against the person to try to get your way. We've all done it.

All of us have the spirit of a German restroom guard. And it blocks us from loving people as Jesus loved.

Miller identifies three things that block love—  
judging, self-righteousness, and legalism.

These three love blockers appear often in the Gospels as Jesus' loving interactions with people are contrasted with the way his disciples and his critics treat people. Two weeks ago we saw how the disciples and the Pharisees judged the man born blind, and how that blocked them from loving him as Jesus did.

Last week we saw how Simon the Pharisee's self-righteousness kept him from seeing and loving the woman whose life had been changed by God's grace.

Today we're going to look the third love-blocker

Judging, self-righteousness, and legalism overlap in a lot of ways.

All three of them often function together in a person's life.

But there are enough distinguishing features

that it's helpful to consider them separately as we allow the light of God's Word to shine into our hearts and illuminate the dark corners.

We're going to look at these passages and this topic under three points:

1. The practice of legalism
2. The beliefs behind legalism
3. The cure for legalism

## **MP#1 The practice of legalism**

What does it look like in real life? Let's look more closely at these two stories. Martha, Mary, and brother Lazarus were some of Jesus' most devoted disciples. We don't know how that relationship began or how long it had existed when this first story took place, but clearly there was friendship and Jesus felt comfortable staying with them.

Martha was apparently the eldest sibling and the hostess of the home.

You notice right away that Martha and Mary, though sisters and both followers of Christ, were two different women.

Martha was direct and matter of fact, Mary reflective and emotionally sensitive.

Christians are not the same—different personalities, different birth orders, some introverts, some extroverts, and that means different approaches to Christian life. And that's as it should be. Lord doesn't intend for us to be the same or do the same.

You can picture this incident so perfectly in your mind's eye, can't you.

Jesus and all his hungry disciples showed up.

Of course, that didn't rattle Martha at all.

That was the sort of challenge where she was best. So she started pulling everything together for meals and sleeping arrangements.

But Mary sat at Jesus' feet and began listening to his teaching.

As Martha passed by she became more and more irritated.

Years ago I heard a preacher say that he envisioned some swinging saloon-type doors into Martha's kitchen. And every time she passed by the living room and saw Mary just sitting in there, she would hit those swinging doors—bam! He was really funny.

Then, she just couldn't take it any longer and she gave Jesus what for:

“Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself.”

Now, I said a moment ago legalism is focusing on a rule and forgetting the person.

What was Martha's rule? I think her rule was:

When there's work to be done, we should all pitch in and help.

Is that a good rule? That's a very good rule.

But the problem is Martha misused the rule. She could have asked for help if she really needed it. She didn't. She was capable of handling it herself.

She got upset with Mary for breaking the rule, with Jesus for not enforcing the rule. She used the rule to try to make people feel bad and coerce them into doing what she wanted. She appealed to principle but it was a mask for her judgmental spirit. She accused Mary of wasting time and Jesus of not caring for her,

but she herself did not care enough to see the joy this was bringing her sister. There was an abrasiveness and an accusatory tone in Martha's words that are almost always indicative of legalism.

Also possible bothered Mary breaking a societal rule. Sitting with the Rabbi like she was one of the guys instead of in the kitchen as expected. Maybe.

Notice how Jesus responded. Its exactly what we have come to expect of Jesus.

He's looking at her, he's focused on her.

Maybe they've stepped through those swinging doors into the kitchen.

He says her name twice to show his regard and affection—Martha, Martha.

And he challenges her not to forget that the most important thing is knowing him.

That way our serving him and other people comes from a response to his grace.

That's what Martha forgot in her busyness.

What's so interesting in this next story John that happened months later—

the sisters are in the same places—Martha serving, Mary with Jesus.

But Martha has grown and she's loving and she's learned to serve as a response to

God's grace. If she needed help, she would ask folks to chip in, but she

has learned not to use that rule as a weapon to coerce and hurt people.

But who does that in this second story? Judas does. What was Judas' rule?

His rule was: Don't waste money. Is that a good rule? Yes!

This pint of nard Mary poured on Jesus cost 300 denarii, a year's wages.

Equivalent to \$30,000 to \$40,000 dollars. Likely Mary's dowry.

It was an extravagant act of love that Jesus not only defended,

but in Mark he declared it to be the supreme example of worship and devotion

that Christians throughout the ages are to seek to emulate.

Judas said that it should have been sold and the money given to the poor.

He seemed to be standing on principal, but he was motivated by selfishness.

He wanted access to that money for himself.

Jesus also challenged Judas' legalism, just like Martha.

In different words he said the same thing.

The poor you always have with you, but me you will not always have.

The most important thing is knowing Jesus, so serve poor in response to grace.

If you do it as a rule or principle, serving yourself and blocking love.

But Judas didn't believe, didn't respond like Martha.

His legalistic heart led him to betray Jesus and eventually sent him to hell.

So let's peel all this back and look a bit deeper.

**MP#2 The beliefs behind legalism**

In both these stories, Mary is commended for worshipping Jesus.

That's a clue to what's behind both Martha's legalism and Judas's. It's worship. More specifically it's the worship of an idol or false god.

We've covered the subject of idolatry countless times over the years.

It's a subject of enormous importance that permeates the Bible.

The first commandment is, Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

The first sin is having other gods besides the one true and living God.

Idolatry is taking some created thing

and trusting it to give you what God alone can give.

Trusting it for security, for comfort, for affirmation, for affection, for control.

Trusting it to save you from whatever unhappiness or fears you face.

And just like the true God gives us commands to follow through which

we show him our affection and through which he blesses us—

so false gods and idols have commandments and rules.

Do this and I'll bless you, they promise.

Let's start with Judas.

What was his life organized around? What was most important to him?

Money. Money is the idol of a great many people.

In fact, in the Sermon on the Mount,

Jesus uses money as the premier example of idolatry.

He says you cannot serve both God and Mammon. That's the actual word in Greek.

Some Bibles translate it money. You cannot serve both God and money.

But it's actually a more specific than that—it's money as a power, money as a god.

Money with a capital M.

The reason Mammon is such a compelling idol for so many people is that it promises almost everything—security, pleasure, approval, power.

The money idol has rules depending on what it is promising you.

If you are looking to money for security, one rule is: Don't waste money.

You're going to need me, says Money.

And if I'm spent on other things, like perfume for Jesus, not around to help you.

So keeping the rule becomes much more important than loving people.

Especially if they are members of your household or if their economic decisions will in any way negatively affect you.

Now the thing is, in Bible, Proverbs, lots about stewardship and not wasting money.

But the book of Proverbs starts saying: The fear of the Lord beginning of wisdom.

So all those rules and counsel about money is in that context.

You are called to steward your money and resources as a way to honor God. And when that is the motive, then it doesn't keep you from loving people. You don't use the rules to try to browbeat them or make them feel bad—like Judas did to Mary.

So what about Martha?

What was her life organized around? What was most important to her? I think it was work, and maybe order and efficiency.

And perhaps, as suggested, playing socially accepted roles.

She liked everything to be just so and perfectly fair.

You can see, can't you, how our personalities push us toward different idols.

What was Martha trusting work, order, and efficiency to give her?

Probably a sense of control, maybe approval of other people.

Her idol had a rule:

When there's work to be done, everybody has to chip in.

As we've said, nothing wrong with that as far as it goes.

Bible says a strand of three cords not easily broken, and in many counselors is much wisdom.

A person who loved God could say: I really, really need you to help me.

Jesus even said something like that in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Could you not stay awake with me and watch for one hour?

But the problem was that in that moment, Martha was serving her idol.

The rule had to be followed, and that made her demanding and full of self-pity. The very thing she was working for, to provide Jesus with a comfortable place to stay so he could teach his disciples—she almost ruined that with her outburst! Because it wasn't an offering of love, it was service to her efficiency idol.

Well, it was really both. She did love Jesus. She really did. And her sister.

Martha was a believer, so like us, she had mixed motives.

Read her conversation with Jesus in John 11.

She was a person of great theological and biblical depth.

And she had this idol that she probably struggled with most of her life.

I hope that's an encouragement to you. It is to me.

Brings us to the third point . . .

### **MP#3 The cure for legalism**

You have to identify your idols and you have to preach the Gospel to yourself. First, you have to identify what it is you are trusting besides God, what it's promising you, and what rules it's insisting you keep and enforce on others.

The way you do that is look at your problem emotions and trace back to the source.

Why am I so furious my sister is sitting in the living room with Jesus?

Because she's not helping! Why is that so bad? What am I afraid of?

Things will be disorderly and work might not get done.

Why is that so important to me?

Because then my life feels like it's out of control.

Isn't that something you need to trust the Lord to take care of?

It takes peeling back the layers to get to your idols sometimes.

I'm trusting work for my identity. I'm trusting money for my security.

I'm trusting my children's success for my happiness, my approval.

But the thing I want to focus on that you have to preach the Gospel to yourself.

What is the Gospel? Gospel means Good News. Message of Bible.

Different ways it could be summarized.

Jesus died on cross for our sins and we can be saved by faith in him.

Paul Miller's father was a man named John Miller.

He put it this way:

The good news is that I'm more wicked and evil than I ever dared to admit,  
and at the same time I'm more loved and accepted than I ever dared to hope.

John Miller used to say: Cheer up, you're much worse than you think you are.

Point was that the Good News begins with the honest and profoundly  
humbling message that we are basket cases in need of God's help.

We don't have it all together and we cannot save ourselves.

But the other half of that Good News is that God loves us in Christ,  
more than we can ever imagine or hope.

And that message raises you from the dust.

So the Gospel simultaneously humbles you and raises you.

Legalism says the opposite.

It says: I'm basically a good person. I don't need radical change.

All I need is surface change.

And obeying a few good rules of my choosing will do the trick.

The stance toward other people is then: Obey my rules and it will fix you.

It leads to pride and self-righteousness and it blocks love.

Adrienne came home early last summer and had this diet she wanted us to go on.

I won't bore you with all the particulars, but it involved cutting out sugar.

I've inherited a fast metabolism, but over several years I was starting to put on a  
solid layer of middle-aged belly fat. My pants didn't fit.

I had to unbutton them under belt.  
So I cut out sugar and started running a little, doing sit-ups and it just disappeared  
and I actually lost an inch in my waistline and had to get my pants taken in.

I was with a preacher friend of mine recently who guzzles Dr. Pepper,  
and I was looking at his gut and do you know what?  
I felt like I was better than him. And I thought, if I can do it, he can do it.  
I can keep the diet rule. Look how healthy and disciplined I am.  
He ought to be able to keep the diet rule too and cut out those sweet drinks.

Once Jesus was eating with some Pharisees and they criticized him and his disciples  
because they didn't wash their hand before eating. Extra rule they had created.  
Jesus said: You're like someone who washes the outside of a cup,  
but the inside is full of filth and corruption.  
His point was that legalism is so appealing because it allows us to feel good  
about ourselves and avoid the real problem, which is the inside, our hearts.  
We tend to choose the rules that suit us, the ones we are able to follow,  
the ones we like—Martha was a worker and a cleaner, so she chose those rules.  
We keep those rules and expect other people to do them like we do.  
It's much easier than the hard, humbling and sacrificial work of loving people.

Legalism is ultimately a false gospel.

It focuses on the bad news of other people's failures  
and the good news of our own performance.  
We have to repent of it thoroughly and embrace and believe the true Gospel  
of Jesus Christ, we have to admit to the Lord every day that we are thoroughly  
messed up and that we need him. to change us.  
When we do that, and it sinks in, then lots of tough issues about loving people  
become more clear—like how we do lovingly confront someone who is  
breaking God's commandments and straying down some harmful path.  
Of course that's loving. Jesus himself speaks to both Martha and even Judas.  
Let's identify and repent of our idolatry and preach the Gospel to ourselves,  
and learn to love like Jesus.