

Title: The rotten fruit of legalism
Text: Matthew 12.9-14
Theme: Priorities of the heart
Series: Matthew #65
Prop Stmtnt: You find a way to treasure what your heart truly worships AND you find a way to trash what you truly abhor.

Read Text:

The self-inflicted death of Robin Williams was another reminder that there is an enormous difference between being funny and being happy. If you have the ability to make people laugh, you know that possessing this skill does not necessarily mean that you are happy. In fact, it is very tempting to use your talent of making people laugh as a way of deflecting people from seeing the true turmoil of your soul. We assume that funny people are happy, some are, but many are not. They live in this same broken, decaying, disappointing world that you do. They live with the weight of sin. Meaning, they live with the burden that comes from things in life that are not fair and from being sinned against and while that is often a crushing weight, what is completely unsustainable is living under the weight of the realization of how your own sin has affected others. What do you do with that? What do you with the fact that you really do not measure up?

At the end of chapter 11 Jesus offers us the way out. In order to take off the burden and weight of sin, you have to take on the burden of following Christ. But, here is the difference. The burden of sin will crush, pulverize and grind you into tiny, disconnected and lifeless pieces. You cannot handle the burden of sin. It just breaks you apart. You are not whole. The burden of Christ however, is a burden (a backpack of sorts) that has been immersed in grace, hope and joy. It is a burden of sorts because it is a responsibility. But, this responsibility is not yours to carry alone. If you are a follower of Christ then you are carrying this weight by being yoked with Christ, who does the heavy lifting. His yoke is easy and his burden is light. That is what he tells us at the end of chapter 11.

Introduction – The Connection from the chapter 11

In contrast to the yoke of Christ, that is being yoked with Christ who does the heavy lifting, is the yoke of the self-righteous that, in rejecting Christ, you are trying to do the heavy lifting, but cannot. In self-righteousness, your good is never good enough. That is what Matthew points out in the beginning of chapter 12. Chapters 11 and 12 tell us about the formal opposition that begins to arise against Christ. This opposition will result in his arrest, trial, and execution. The entire story line would read like a grievous tragedy if it weren't for the resurrection. The resurrection changes everything. But, if you are reading this for the first time, and if you do not know about the resurrection, then right here, you are left with the fact that Jesus is being rejected and despised because ... well, because ... he, uh ...heals people, speaks the truth, offers people forgiveness, and claims to be King, Savior and God. (really?!)

Certainly the Pharisees and a few others get pretty wigged out about his claims to Sovereignty and Deity, but I really do not think that they are primarily bothered about his claims to be King as much as they are bothered about the kind of King he claims to be. If Jesus would have said, "Look, I need a little help in establishing my kingdom. I need your advice, your connections, and your expertise. In exchange I will give you a prominent place of power, and will knock off the Romans, and (keep this on the Q-T now), we will eliminate those worldly Sadducees too." If he had done that, they would have loved him. The Pharisees would have loved to follow someone who made much of them because self-righteousness is simply self-worship. But Jesus cannot make much of them because they are rotten to the core but won't admit it. They are trusting in their own righteousness. They are trusting in their behavior. They are trusting in their performance of law-keeping, ritual performing, sacrifice-making, religiosity to save them. Their performance (themselves) is their god. Their performance is their idol. Anything that threatens their idol is going to arouse their wrath because they have propped up this idol of their performance. They have polished this idol. They have adorned this idol with their love, affection, devotion and trust. Now, it is not an idol of wood, or stone, but it is an idol of their heart. From the outside they do not appear to be idol-worshippers. They appear to be very religious and devoted people. They claim to be God-worshippers. But, do you realize that these religious and devoted people actually hate God? They hate God so much they set out as to how they might destroy him (v.14). They claim to love God. They say that they are devoted to God and when someone says that, we want to believe them, but in reality they hate God because when God shows up they detest him, argue with him, reject him and end up calling for his crucifixion. So, what is going on? They love a god, but not the true God. They love a god that they have fashioned in their minds. They love a god who makes much of them. Because in reality, they love themselves and they have created a religion of self-worship. That is the heart of legalism. In life there is one of three yokes that you can choose.

1. The yoke of unrighteousness

You can choose the yoke of unrighteousness by living an unrestrained, immoral, lawless, and godless life. But, you are still in a yoke, even though you think and are told that this is freedom. It is not freedom at all. You are in bondage to the sin. The very things that you thought would be so enticing deceived you and bound you and entrapped you and won't let you go. The yoke of unrighteousness is more like a noose that gets tighter and tighter until you are dead.

2) The yoke of self-righteousness

You can choose the yoke of self-righteousness. In this yoke, you are pushing and plowing, but it is never good enough. You can never rest. You can never enjoy grace. You never measure up. And because your work is never done, you want everyone around you to be as miserable as you, so you try to make them live under your weight. We will look at this in more depth when we get to Matthew 23, where Jesus is pronouncing judgment on the Scribes and Pharisees and accusing them of tying up heavy burdens that

are hard to bear and laying them on people's shoulders. And the weight of the plow that you are pulling only gets heavier and heavier while the goal gets farther and farther away.

3) **The yoke of Christ's righteousness**

The yoke of Christ's righteousness is true freedom. When you confess your rebellion against God and turn away from it and embrace Christ as your Savior and King, and you willingly, happily, place yourself under his authority, you then take upon yourself his burden and yoke. But, that means that you have admitted your need. That is our biggest problem. Hands down that is the fundamental issue that we struggle with by far the very worst. The yoke of unrighteousness is pretty easy to identify. The yoke of self-righteousness looks good. The yoke of self-righteousness can get you many compliments, titles, awards and a whole lot of respect. But, self-righteousness is no righteousness at all and will damn you. But, when you are caught up in it, you don't see that. You can't see it because you are blinded by your own righteousness. You have found examples of why you are better than someone else and these examples assure you that you are indeed one of the finest. Yes indeed. But, you are not!

Look at how absurd, how utterly absurd, how completely off course and blind these Pharisees had become. So, what is happening here in Matthew 12? Jesus enters into one of their synagogues. I take that to mean that one of the Pharisees who was part of this group who were arguing, accusing and plotting against Jesus was in the leadership of the synagogue. Jesus walks into enemy territory.

They are so focused on their righteousness that they cannot even see straight. Instead of re-thinking their position as a result of Jesus pointing out the inconsistencies of it (12.1-8), they dug in their heels so much that when Jesus heals a man with a withered hand, they couldn't rejoice with the man, because they do not care about the man. They do not care about his need. They do not care about his withered (right – Dr. Luke) hand. They do not care about what is truly right and good and compassionate and helpful. They only care about themselves and being respected and being important and being authoritative and being right. That is the devastating consequence of self-righteousness. They are so threatened all the time. They do not care if people are truly being converted to Christ and growing. They do not care if lives are being changed and marriages being made whole. They do not care if people are surrendering their lives to serve Christ in missions. They only care, if they get their way, not God's way, mind you, but their way. And they are so convinced that their way is the only way, and is God's way, that even when they cannot support it from the Bible, or when it is exposed as being wrong, they refuse to budge. Do you see this? Matthew 5.5! Blessed are the poor in spirit. Following Christ is a life marked by humility. Gospel-driven humility produces joy.

One of the reasons why I hate self-righteousness so much (in addition to the fact that it is a denial of the gospel and will damn you), is because self-righteousness has no joy! There is no rest in it. You can't rest. You have to keep doing more and more and more because you are never good enough. Here is what I want for you. I want you to be able to look

next to you and see Jesus sharing his yoke with you. I want you to be able hear him say, “Hey, I got this one. You don’t have to push and plow. Just walk with me. I’ll do the lifting, just stay by me. I’ll set the mark, just keep the pace and enjoy the ride. Just talk with me and sing with me and accept my rest and enjoy my strength.

I am using the Pharisees as examples of people who are in bondage to legalism. So, let’s define legalism. First of all, legalism is NOT having rules. Having a bed-time for your kids does not make you a legalist. Making your kids make their bed, pick up their room and help clean the kitchen does not make you a legalist. Having policies and procedures in a church does not make you a legalist. Nathan thinks that if you are going to sing in the choir or play in the orchestra that you ought to come to rehearsal. Imagine that?! Legalism is not having rules; it is the trusting in my keeping of the rules as the basis of my approval before God. Legalism is the trusting of self and performance (think: man-made rules) for righteousness, forgiveness and the approval of others. Legalism is rotten. It is rotten to the core because you do not believe that the life and death of Jesus Christ in your place, was actually good enough. When Jesus cried out, “It is finished” the debt for your sin was paid in full. There is nothing left for you to pay, but legalism does not believe that. Legalism is trying to prove something. Legalism is finding identity in how well I keep up the expectations of others, who are never satisfied. Legalism is like drinking salt water. It never ends and it is so difficult to root out because...

I. **Legalism looks good.** (9-10)

A. **It is devout.**

Before the Romans took over, the Jews were under the domination of the residual effects of the Greek Empire. The influence of the pagan Greek culture threatened to submerge the Jews into idolatry again. There was a man named Judas Maccabaeus who launched a revolt against the pagan leadership. He and his sons and the army they formed attempted to break the yoke of bondage of the remnants of the Greek Empire. But, there was one problem. The Maccabeans, as they became known, would not fight on the Sabbath. They were so zealous of returning the nation of Israel back to following God’s law that they refused to do anything on the Sabbath, even fight. Of course, their enemies figured this out rather quickly and the consequences were devastating. Twice they were attacked on the Sabbath and sustained enormous losses. Then they decided that it was okay to defend oneself, but that they should not go on the offensive on the Sabbath. But, this is how determined they were. They were zealous, but they were wrong. They were determined, but they were wrong. But devotion, determination and zealousness earns respect. People will applaud you for your discipline. Discipline and devotion is impressive and the affirmation that we receive from it, feels good. And for some that approval, that respect, that applause is addicting. It is like snorting pure coke. And this is why legalism so difficult to root out. We are being affirmed, applauded and respected. We are being rewarded for something that is actually wrong. But, we have been trained by the response to think of it and even to feel that it is right. Not only that but ...

B. It is religious.

Isn't being religious a good thing? These men appear to have a concern for the Sabbath. They appear to have a concern for God's law. If it was actually true it would be admirable. But, let's go back to the 10 commandments. The 10 commandments are the foundation and summary of the entire covenant that God established with Israel. Jesus was asked one time, which commandment was the greatest, and do you remember what he said? He said the greatest commandment was to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul and strength and the second (commandment) was to love your neighbor as yourself. And of course, what Jesus did was summarize the 10 commandments. Love God and love others. That was the purpose of the law. Did they love God? No, they actually were trying to destroy him. Did they love others? No! They obviously could care less about the man with the withered hand. Do you see the seriousness of this? Their legalism not only did not count for their forgiveness or righteousness in any way, shape or form, but their devotion and religious zeal were actually adding to the condemnation of their soul. I know this is hard to hear. We are so used to believing that, "since my great-aunt was such a religious person that she is fine." Not unless she truly embraces the gospel. Legalism is so difficult to root out because ...

II. Legalism is conscience-forming. (11-12)

A. It is the alternative standard of right and wrong.

The Pharisees were using the false ruler of self-righteousness and were thus unable to provide correct measurements. However, they taught and enforced this wrong standard as if it was the right standard to the point that it seemed like and felt like the right standard.

Let me give you a personal example. And I know that by using this example, it will make some of you a bit nervous, which only illustrates the point even more. I grew up in a church context where drinking alcoholic beverages of any type was forbidden. Beer, wine, liquor were taboo and the evils of them were easy to identify. I never gave it much thought and assumed that this was the clear position of the Bible since it was the position of the church in which I grew up. But the more I read the Bible I realized that my view was culturally informed and not biblically defensible. It dawned on me one day, that when I get to heaven that Gabriel is not going to fist bump me and congratulate me for making it my whole life without a beer. Nor, if I ever drank one (which I don't) would Michael, the archangel shake his head in disappointment and say, "You were so close, so close, if only you hadn't given in."

Now, for some of you it makes you more than a bit nervous to hear me say that. Let me tell you, it makes me more than a bit nervous to say it. But, my conscience and your conscience must be bound by the Word of God and not by the fear of man and not ever by man-made rules. The Pharisees had added man-made rules to the observance of the

Sabbath. They created a false standard and missed the whole point of the law. Notice what they are concerned about: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” What kind of a question is that? How do you get to the point where you are asking questions like that?

Now, the law itself did not say one way or the other. You were not supposed to work on the Sabbath so that you could enjoy family, rest and the fruit of your work, all of which was a way of enjoying God. But, the law of the Pharisees said that you could not heal on the Sabbath unless it was a life-threatening situation. So, notice how Jesus tries to help them see the heart of the issue. He reframes the question: “Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?” What is he doing? He is trying to get them to see that they are measuring the issue by the wrong ruler. But, when you use the wrong ruler, what happens? ...

B. It makes you feel guilty, even if you are not.

There is such a thing as true guilt. And there is such a thing as false guilt. They both feel the same. That is why you cannot follow your heart, nor let your conscience be your guide. You have to inform your conscience with the Word of God. You have to train your heart with the affections of the Word. Man-made rules will make you feel guilty, even if you are not. These men condemned Jesus in their hearts and with their words and by their actions. They condemned Jesus because he healed a man on the Sabbath (in their synagogue). They were appalled. They were indignant. Their “righteousness” was offended. But, was Jesus guilty of sin? No! Were they appalled? Yes. Were they rightly appalled? No. Were they indignant? Yes. Were they rightly indignant? No. Were they offended? Yes. Were they rightly offended? No. By the way, Jesus refused to allow himself to be bound by their rules. Here is another problem, though...

C. It makes you feel righteous, even when you are not.

Were these Pharisees righteous? No. Did they feel righteous? Yes. You see the problem? When you get upset about things that God does not get upset about, then you will not be concerned about the things that God is. So legalism looks good, when in reality it is bad. Legalism is so damning and so difficult to root out because ...

III. Legalism is so very personal. (11-12)

As I mentioned earlier, legalism is actually self-worship. Self-righteousness is attempting self-salvation. That means that you are the idol. You are the false god. You are trying to save yourself and you are so invested. You have been doing this, believing this, teaching others to do this and believe this. It would be crushing to your pride, to your image and reputation to admit that you are wrong. Mark’s gospel also records this account (chapter 3). He says that Jesus called the man over to him and stood there in front of them and asked them if it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath?

The man with the withered hand was in the synagogue on the Sabbath. It almost sounds as if the whole thing was a set-up. But, even if the man with the withered hand was not

there by design of the Pharisees, the situation was ready made for them. But think about this. Why did they watch him to see if he would heal? Why did they jab him with “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” They assumed this posture because they assumed that Jesus would care for the man and would want to heal him – right? The Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus. They used his love for a broken man as a means of trying to trap him.

Isn't that astounding? So, Jesus stands the man in front of them and asks them, “Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?” What do you say to that? They were busted! They were trapped! Their system was broken! Their beliefs were exposed as being fraudulent and wrong. They were not righteous. It was clear to everyone but them. Mark's gospel says, “They were silent.” They refused to budge. They refused to admit. The exposure of their sin drove their hatred of God. It is devastating to realize what you have believed and what you have been doing to God and to others. Rooting it out requires being undone. It requires being broken and confessing that what you thought was your righteousness is actually adding to your condemnation. That is so hard to accept, even though it is true. That is why legalism is so difficult to root out. It is so personal. Legalism is so damning and so difficult to root out because ...

IV. **Legalism is so blinding.** (13-14)

Two things happened here: 1) Jesus asked these guys a question that was designed to pierce their hearts because it exposed the utter fallacy of their belief system and 2) Jesus healed the man. In response to this miracle, there is no humble, thoughtful, soul-searching, contemplative conversation where these men admit to God and to each other that wow; we sure got called out, didn't we? We have obviously missed the boat. There is none of that, and neither is there any rejoicing in the restoration of the man's hand. Instead of thinking about what Jesus said, they react in anger because they are so blind by their sin. Their sin of self-righteousness blinded them to the truth.

We all are in the same danger.

1. What are the issues (church-related) that matter the most to you?
2. Is your position on that issue a preference or a true biblical conviction?

What is the difference between a preference and a biblical conviction?

3. How do you respond when things are not done your way?
4. Are you known for your humility and teachable-ness or are you so opinionated that most conversations about these matters turn into arguments?
5. What matters more to you: the person you are talking with, or being perceived as being right?