

Stop Look & Listen

Intro:

This is the last day of our series, "Sittin' In The Splash Zone." All summer long, we've been following Jesus' teachings along the lake. It's been a fun series for the summer!

Quick survey this morning... How many of you are rule followers? (show of hands) Look around! These are the ones who play it safe. It's not that they NEVER break a rule, but rule followers, in general, try to do what's expected of them. They're probably not the ones who are going to fill their kids shoes with napkins from the snack bar at Cedar Point so their kid--who's just barely too short to ride the Top Thrill Dragster--can get on!

How many of you are rule breakers? (show of hands) Look around! There are the reckless ones! Their motto is "rules were made to be broken!" Right? They're the ones on your bumper when you're in the fast lane flashing their high beams and you're thinking to yourself, "I'm already going 5 over the speed limit! Gosh, where's the fire?"

Then there are the rule makers. Let's see your hands (show of hands). These are the ones who when they were kids made up all the rules for whatever you were playing. Interestingly enough, those rules always seemed to benefit the rule maker!

I'm a rule challenger. Anyone else with me? (show of hands) We're the ones who are going to ask, "Why do we have that rule, or why do we do things like this?" We drive the rule makers nuts!

Today, we're going to talk about some rule makers that drove Jesus nuts! It seems like every time Jesus turns around, He's dealing with the Pharisees pointing out something that Jesus is doing wrong. So if you have your Bibles, turn with me to Matthew 16. If you need a Bible, raise your hand and we'll get you one. If you don't have a Bible, it's your's to keep--our gift to you. If you have a Bible at home and you're just borrowing one, please put it on the table by the door on your way out.

Read Matthew 16:1-12

In this passage, Jesus issues a warning two times--in verses 6 and verse 12--and today we will see that **the warning Jesus issued to His disciples about the leaven of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees is a warning that we must heed as well.**

In order to understand this warning, we need to understand who the Pharisees and Sadducees are.

First, the Pharisees were experts in the law--known as The Torah or the written law. Think of it like the U.S. Constitution that is a series of written laws but are open to interpretation. They also believed in an oral law that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai. They believed that God gave Moses the knowledge of what the written laws meant and how they should be interpreted. This oral law was written down about 300 years after Moses in a document called the Talmud.

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The Pharisees believed in an afterlife and that God would punish the wicked and reward the righteous. They were also looking for the messiah who would restore Israel to its former glory. Most Pharisees were not from the priestly tribe of Levi. The Pharisees tended to oppose or resist the Greco-Roman cultural influences and instead embraced a more conservative, Jewish cultural tradition.

The Pharisees had developed sophisticated, scholarly interpretations of the law of Moses. While the law was given to show us our need for a Savior, the Pharisees actually believed they could keep the law and developed such an elaborate system that attempted to legalistically enable one to keep the law or at least justify yourself when you couldn't keep it. They were experts at creating loopholes that helped them skirt around some of the requirements of the law.

The Sadducees were of the upper class and mostly of priestly descent. However, unlike the Pharisees, they tended to embrace the Greco-Roman cultural influences. The Sadducees completely rejected any oral law and insisted on a literal interpretation of the written law. For example, since an afterlife is never mentioned in the Torah, the Sadducees didn't believe in heaven or hell. The Sadducees focus was on the temple and its associated rituals. Once the temple was destroyed around 70 A.D., the Sadducees disappeared. None of their writings survived so the little we do know about them comes from the Pharisees, the fathers of modern Judaism.

The Pharisees and Sadducees made up the Sanhedrin--think Supreme Court--whose responsibility it was to interpret civil AND religious laws. Their primary responsibility was to make sure everyone followed the law--be it written or oral. This put them on a direct collision course with Jesus, who's purpose for coming to the earth was to free us from the law.

So why should we be concerned about the warning Jesus issued to His disciples about the leaven of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees? The answer is simple. Because Pharisees still exist! Oh, we don't call them Pharisees or Sadducees, but they are still here and they are still causing trouble. We could probably have a big group therapy session of people who have been hurt in the Church by these Pharisees! The leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees is **legalism**.

Let me share with you from my own personal experiences. I grew up in a very legalistic environment. Many people think Southern Baptists are extremely conservative. Well, in the circles I grew up in--Independent, Fundamental Baptist--Southern Baptists were going to hell! They probably weren't even Christians! Let me share a few stories...

I grew up in Minnesota. Our winters were cold and we had lots of snow. My sister's class was going sledding for a field trip. Now, at the Christian School we attended, they believed it was a sin for a woman to wear pants (men's clothing) (Deuteronomy 22:5). One of the girls in my sister's class asked if they could wear snow pants to go sledding. Her response? "Only if you wear your culottes over your snow pants." I kid you not!

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Growing up, we never went to movies, we didn't play with face, we never consumed alcohol, and never danced. In fact, in 4th grade I was going to public school and in PE class, the dance unit came up and my parents sent a note with me to school to excuse me from participating for "religious reasons." I was 18 when I went to my first movie. It was "The Hunt For Red October."

When I went off to college, I chose Liberty University. It was founded by the late Dr. Jerry Falwell. Again, most mainstream evangelicals consider Dr. Falwell to have been extremely conservative. But to my parents, and the church culture I was coming from, he and Billy Graham were considered "liberals" and my parents were not sure they wanted me to go to Liberty.

It was at Liberty, coincidentally, where I began to experience "liberty." My parents would call and if my roommates always got me in trouble! They were always a little too specific! One time they called and we were playing spades. Another time, I was at a movie. Often, I got the 3rd degree from my parents for "turning my back on all the standards I had been raised with."

My detox of legalism and my newfound freedom in Christ would only collide with the church culture I was raised in. I remember being home one Easter weekend and my home church asked me to sing. Our church had experienced an unusual period of growth while I was away at college. Actually, what happened is the Independent Fundamental Baptist Church in the next town had had a church split and half of their members ended up at our church. Our church was now meeting in a high school auditorium and had a sound system for the first time. I'd been away at Liberty singing on a group that travelled with a sound system. So, that Easter morning, I grabbed the mic and began to do a sound check with my accompanist. Well, a deacon came up to me, took the mic out of my hand and said, "We don't use microphones here because they are sexually suggestive--we can hear you breathe!"

I could go on and on with hurtful experiences as could many of you. The leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees is legalism. **Legalism** is the antonym of **liberty**. In his book "The Grace Awakening," Chuck Swindoll says, "Legalism is an attitude, a mentality based on pride. It is an obsessive conformity to an artificial standard for the purpose of exalting oneself."

Let me stop here and say that there is nothing wrong with having your own personal set of do's and don'ts for you or your family. However, it is wrong to begin to expect everyone else to have your same list and if they don't, you exclude or avoid them.

Let me clarify something else. The Bible does have some lists of do's and don'ts and those are non-negotiables. When I speak of legalism, I am referring to things that are not explicitly addressed in Scripture. I am also not diminishing the importance of accountability among believers. When another believer is acting in a way that is contrary to Scripture, it is our responsibility and our duty to lovingly pull them aside and confront the issue--but that is another message entirely!

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S. Lewis Johnson wrote an article titled "The Paralysis of Legalism." Chuck Swindoll quotes him in "The Grace Awakening." In the article he says:

"One of the most serious problems facing the orthodox Christian church today is the problem of legalism. One of the most serious problems facing the church in Paul's day was the problem of legalism. In every day it is the same. Legalism wrenches the joy of the Lord from the Christian believer, and with the joy of the Lord goes his power for vital worship and vibrant service. Nothing is left but cramped somber, dull and listless profession. The truth is betrayed, and the glorious name of the Lord becomes a synonym for a gloomy kill-joy. The Christian under law is a miserable parody of the real thing."

Legalism confuses **unanimity with unity**. God loves variety! He isn't stamping out little cookie-cutter Christians across the world so we all think, look and sound alike. Unity is a beautiful, mysterious thing that takes a tremendous amount of effort to attain. It is a great source of security but comes only at great risk.

Unanimity is clean. It can be measured, monitored and enforced. You have your list of do's and don'ts and those who ascribe to your list of behaviors--which are typically all external in nature--are in the club and those who don't are out.

The difference is that unanimity requires **conformity** while unity requires **grace**. Think about it. Unity requires grace--grace from God and grace toward others.

So what is liberty? Does that mean we get to do whatever we want to do? Well, you can't tell a bunch of Christians that or they'll be off living like the devil and no one will be able to see a difference! You gotta have standards! Liberty is freedom. It's freedom from something, but it is also freedom to do something.

Perhaps one of the most notable Pharisees in the Bible is the apostle Paul. In Acts 21 & 22, Paul gives his credentials as a Jewish Pharisee. He knows firsthand the bondage of legalism. That's why he fights it so strongly in his letter to the Galatians.

Read Galatians 5:1

Here's what was going on: Paul had been given a direct revelation of God that he was to take the gospel to the Gentiles--that's everyone who is not of Jewish descent. Peter was called specifically to reach the Jews. A huge question came to the surface as a result of Paul bringing the gospel to the Jews: Should Gentile converts to Christianity be required to be circumcised? To put it another way, was it necessary for Moses to complete what Christ had begun or was Christ's death and resurrection enough? The whole Christian Church was in an uproar about this issue, so the apostles decided to meet in Jerusalem to come to a decision on the matter. They concluded that Paul was right and that circumcision was not required for salvation. Well, this brought all the legalists out of the woodwork and Paul's letter to the church in Galatia dealt with this very issue.

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What Paul is saying is that because of Christ's death and resurrection, we are no longer slaves to the law. So don't put yourself back under slavery to the law again!

But the legalist replies: (Snarky tone) Liberty doesn't give us license to do whatever we want to do and if you preach liberty Christians will do whatever they want and drag the name of Christ through the mud!

Well, to believe in grace to that extreme means that some will take advantage of it. You see, if we truly understand what Jesus went through to buy our liberty, that is enough to constrain us. I love the example that Chuck Swindoll uses in his book "The Grace Awakening":

He recounts what happened when he first got his drivers license. When he walked into the house with his shiny new license, his dad tossed him the keys to the family car and said he could have it for two hours all on his own. He danced out to the garage, climbed in the car and backed out of the driveway. Thoughts of driving 100mph down the road and maybe even running a few stoplights flashed through his mind. After all, no one was with him to tell him to stop! But something strange happened--he didn't do any of that. In fact, he says he doesn't believe he even went above the speed limit and he brought the car home early--he didn't even use the whole 2 hours. He had his dad's car all to himself with a full tank of gas and complete freedom for 2 hours to do whatever he wanted to do but he didn't go crazy. Why? His relationship with his father was so strong that he just couldn't. He had developed such a relationship of love and trust that it constrained him when he had the opportunity to do otherwise.

Why is it that the only place where we can experience the free life--the church--is the very place we are in the most danger of losing it? I find it interesting that Jesus used a word picture like leaven or yeast when referring to legalism. Yeast is a living organism but it can lie dormant for months or years until it is introduced to the right environment. And it doesn't take much to have an affect! The reason Jesus warns us is that this leaven--legalism--is inside all of us! For some, it is dormant until the environment is just right. For others, the yeast of legalism has puffed them up with pride just like yeast causes bread dough to rise.

I believe there are **3 causes for legalism in the church** and Paul address them in his letter to the Galatians. The first is...

1) Wrong Doctrine

Turn to Galatians 1:6-10.

Read Galatians 1:6-10

Legalism **distorts the gospel**. The issue here in Galatia was that legalists had begun to teach another gospel. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross evidently wasn't enough. They had to go back to the law of Moses and drag circumcision back into the mix. Salvation is God's love reaching down to lost humanity through the death and resurrection of Christ

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that ultimately brings all glory and honor only to God for His amazing love. Legalism takes some of the glory that is only God's and give it to man for his performance because...

Legalism **appeals to the flesh**. It tells you that if you give enough money, you attend enough services, say enough prayers, distribute enough Gospel tracts, then all your efforts will make God happy. Our humanistic tendencies have difficulty accepting something for nothing! We've think that we've just got to earn it! Ephesians 2:8-9 says that we have been saved by grace through faith not by works so that no one can brag.

And legalism **seeks the approval of men**. Back to Galatians 1:10, Paul asks, "Am I now trying to win human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." We discussed earlier how Paul had been a Pharisee. He indicates in this verse that at one point in his life, he sought the approval of men. But now that he is a servant of Christ, he doesn't need the approval of men. Another cause for legalism in the church is:

2) Bad motives

Look at Galatians chapter 2 verse 1-5. Paul is telling the Galatians about the meeting of the apostles in Jerusalem to discuss the issue of Gentile circumcision.

Read Galatians 2:1-5

Sad to say, there are people in the church who have bad motives. I've been hurt by them; you've been hurt by them. They enjoy throwing their weight around, controlling people and manipulating them to do what they want them to do. Eugene Peterson says:

"There are people who do not want us to be free. They don't want us to be free before God, accepted just as we are by his grace. They don't want us to be free to express our faith originally and creatively in the world. They want to control us; they want to use us for their own purposes. They themselves refuse to live arduously and openly in faith, but huddle together with a few others and try to get a sense of approval by insisting that all look alike, talk alike and act alike, thus validating one another's worth. They try to enlarge their numbers only on the condition that new members act and talk and behave the way they do. These people infiltrate communities of faith "to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus" and not infrequently find ways to control, restrict and reduce the lives of free Christians. Without being aware of it, we become anxious about what others will say about us, obsessively concerned about what others think we should do. We no longer live the good news but anxiously try to memorize and recite the script that someone else has assigned to us. In such an event we may be secure, but we will not be free. We may survive as a religious community, but we will not experience what it means to be human, alive in love and faith, expansive in hope. Conforming and self-congratulatory behavior is not free. But Paul "did not yield in submission even for a moment, that the truth of the gospel

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might be preserved for you.” Every free person who benefits from Paul’s courage will continue vigilant in the resistance movement he formed.”

I heard a story of a missionary family that, like my family, loved peanut butter. However, on the mission field where they were serving, they couldn’t get it. So, they had arranged for some friends in the U.S. to periodically ship over some peanut butter. Well, other missionaries in the same country began to badger this family about the peanut butter. These missionaries felt that it was akin to “bearing a cross” or “partaking in Christ’s suffering” to give up the luxury of peanut butter to serve the Lord and felt that this peanut butter partaking family was somehow less committed, less spiritual, less godly. The pressure and poor treatment became so severe on this family that they eventually packed up and returned home. Paul fought against people with bad motives and so should we. A third cause for legalism in the church is...

3) Hypocrisy

In Matthew 23:1-3, Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees

Read Matthew 23:1-3

Galatians records one of those rare moments when the apostles were in conflict with one another. Remember, Paul had been called to reach Gentiles while Peter had been called to reach the Jews.

Read Galatians 2:11-14

Jews followed certain dietary restrictions. For instance, Jews did not eat any pork. So, Peter was evidently being a hypocrite and Paul called him out on it. Ralph Keiper paraphrases this exchange:

“Peter, I smell ham on your breath. You forgot your Certs. There was a time when you wouldn’t eat ham as part of your hope of salvation. Then after you trusted Christ, it didn’t matter if you ate ham. But now when the no-ham eaters have come from Jerusalem you have gone back to your kosher ways. But the smell of ham still lingers on your breath. You are most inconsistent. You are compelling Gentile believers to observe Jewish law which can never justify anyone. Peter, by returning to the law, you undercut strength for godly living.”

Hypocrisy is especially damaging to children. If you really want to mess up your kids, bring them up in an environment where perception is more important than reality. Embrace a long list of do’s and don’ts publicly but hypocritically practice them privately.

I witnessed much of this in the church culture I grew up in. Many of my friends had parents who publicly supported the legalistic stance of their church, but in private, their parents were much more permissive. Consequently, most of my Christian school classmates have either walked away from their faith entirely or they have taken their own place in publicly supporting the same legalistic structure they despised as kids.

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The real danger of legalism is that it eventually causes us to miss God. In John 5:31-40, Jesus' authority is being questioned by the Pharisees.

Read John 5:31-40

Later, Jesus is brought before the Sanhedrin made up of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He is falsely accused, tried, severely beaten and then crucified by these who "studied the Scriptures diligently" because their legalism caused them to miss God. It will do the same to you and I.

So how do we overcome legalism and stand up for liberty? We have to **stop, look and listen.** Let's look at Galatians 5:1 again.

Read Galatians 5:1

First, we must **stop seeking the approval of men.** We must follow the example of Paul who gave up trying to please people and instead focused on experiencing the freedom that comes with being a slave to Christ. It may sound like an oxymoron, but true freedom is only found in submitting to the authority of Christ in our lives! Accepting Christ's death on the cross for our sin makes us in right standing with God--we already have His approval and there is absolutely nothing you can do to make you "righter" with Him.

Second, **look out for false spirituality.** Don't submit yourself to the lie of trying to be "spiritual" by performance. Avoid systems and people who place behavioral expectations on you in order to be accepted into their group. Jesus constantly challenged the Pharisees. In fact, he saved his harshest words not for sinners but for the religious. True spiritual vitality starts on the inside and works its way to the outside. In Luke 11:37-39, Jesus confronts the Pharisees with their false spirituality that was based on outward behavior.

Read Luke 11:37-39

I love the words to the worship song "From the Inside Out":

A thousand times I've failed still your mercy remains
And should I stumble again still I'm caught in your grace
Everlasting your light will shine when all else fades
Never ending your glory goes beyond all fame
My heart and my soul I give you control
Consume me from the inside out Lord
Let justice and praise become my embrace
To love you from the inside out

True and lasting spirituality comes from within--from a heart that has been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Yes, there is a way that believers should behave! But we must be transformed from within and not just conformed on the outside!

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Lastly, we need to **listen to and speak the truth**. We must live honestly. If we don't agree with someone, say so kindly but firmly. If you're the only one, be true to yourself and stand firm. When you mess up, own it. If you don't know something, admit it--don't fake it. If someone--maybe your kids--calls you out on your hypocrisy, admit it and confess it.

Closing

In a moment we're going to experience communion together. This is one of the greatest ways to remember the truth. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross is enough. There is absolutely nothing you could ever do to make you more right with God than accepting His sacrifice on the cross. His grace is enough for you.

As we go to reflection today, **will you accept in faith that His grace is enough for you?** On the cross, a great exchange occurred. God took the sins of all humanity and put it on his innocent and perfect son Jesus--God wrapped in flesh. If you believe and accept this exchange and ask God He will take the innocence and perfection of His Son Jesus and place it on you making you forever right with Him. If you want to know more about that exchange, we would love to share more about it with you. You can seek me out after our gathering this morning or you can write us a note on your communication card and we'll follow up with you. No religious system based on trying harder or keeping a list of do's and don'ts can save us from the penalty of our sin.

Second, **are you living in liberty or in legalism?** Have you allowed others to enslave you to their false spirituality based on your performance? Maybe you have enslaved others by attempting to conform others to your prescribed list of do's and don'ts. Confess it to Him this morning and move into a life of true liberty!

Jesus' body represented by this bread--unleavened bread--was broken for you and His blood represented by this cup of juice was drained from His body. This is costly grace. Yes, it is risky to preach liberty and grace. But if we regularly take the time to remember the grace, love and sacrifice of Jesus for our sins, that alone should constrain us--not because we've been guilted into keeping some artificial list of do's and don'ts.

So this morning as we go to communion, I want to invite you to **write a prayer of thanksgiving for His grace that brought you liberty**. You'll see that the reflection stations where the communion elements are prepared are covered with paper and there are pens there for you to use.

Let's pray...