

## Sermon: The Jig is Up

Text: Colossians 2:16-23

### Introduction:

The focus of our study today is on legalism.

Let's begin with a good definition:

***Legalism exists when people attempt to secure righteousness in God's sight by good works. Legalists believe that they can earn or merit God's approval by performing the requirements of the law. A legalist believes that their good works and obedience to God affects their salvation. Legalism focuses on God's laws more than relationship with God, keeping external laws without a truly submitted heart. Legalism adds human rules to divine laws and treats them as divine.***

Sounds pretty awful, doesn't it?!

The fact is, legalism is one of the most attractive, comfortable, and appealing ways of thinking on planet earth.

Start with the fact we all are wired to want to keep score. People naturally like to know where they stand. The problem is, we also like this approach with respect to our eternal destiny. Literally every world religion (other than Christianity) is based on keeping score. Take Islam for example, which has "Five Pillars": Declaration of faith; Obligatory prayer five times daily; Compulsory giving; Fasting during the month of Ramadan; and a Pilgrimage to Mecca once in their lifetime. This isn't anything like the Ten Commandments, that God gives to all of us as a guideline for our hearts. These five pillars, according to Muslims, determine a person's salvation. They're a scorecard. And this isn't just true for Muslims—this is true for EVERY world religion outside of Christianity.

The other thing that is so appealing about legalism is the fact that people don't want to submit their hearts to God. God is absolutely clear in the Bible that what He wants is to have a RELATIONSHIP with us! He wants us to have FAITH in Him, and allow Him to have control of our hearts and our lives. But pride gets in the way. In our pride and self-centeredness, we want to maintain control of our lives—and keep God at arms-length. We mistakenly think that if we maintain a good "image" on the outside, and if we can somehow manage to have our "good deeds" outweigh our "bad deeds" on some cosmic scorecard—then we'll "get into heaven."

Wrong.

Jesus reserved His harshest words for a group of "religious" people called Pharisees. They were the kings of legalism. They were hypocritical to their core. Not only did they believe that they were "earning" their way to God (and "looking good" in the process), but they also believed that they could impose their rule-based religion on others. Let's first take a look at what Jesus said to these Pharisees—and then what Paul said regarding the legalists in Colossae that were threatening to undermine the faith of this start-up church.

## Examination:

- Read **Matthew 23**
  - Jesus first addresses what the Pharisees are teaching with regards to the Old Testament law of Moses. What does He say?
  - The issue comes in verses 3-4. What's the problem?
  - What, according to verse 8, are the Pharisees most concerned about?
  - What does Jesus say regarding pride and humility? (vv. 11-12)
  - How many times in this chapter does Jesus say "Woe to you...?"
  - What sin are the Pharisees and teachers of the law most guilty of?
  - Verse 33 is clear regarding the fate of these legalists. What is it?
  - What, according to verse 37, is Jesus deepest desire for these people—and for all of the inhabitants of Jerusalem (and the whole world)?
  
- Read **Colossians 2:16-23**
  - The reason Paul says what he says in verse 16 is because the false teachers in Colossae were telling these new Christians exactly what they should and shouldn't eat; what they should and shouldn't drink; how they should or shouldn't celebrate various religious festivals (think Christmas or Easter); whether or not they should observe "new moon festivals; and how they should behave on Sabbath day. Think for a minute about what it looks like to be a Christian today. Are there religious people out there who think they have the right to tell you what to eat? What to drink? How to celebrate religious holidays? Other "special days" that you need to be observing? How you ought to behave on Sunday?
  - In verse 17, Paul gets to the reason why these false teachers had no basis for telling these young Christians how to treat these choices. Every one of these rules is a "shadow" of far more important things. The reality isn't the rule—the reality is found...where?
  - Legalism makes us think ALL ABOUT the rules. The focus is the RULE. And the person making up the rule is the legalist. Which puts WHO in charge? Who ought to be in charge?
  - What do you think it means to "delight in false humility"? Does this remind you of the Pharisees in Matthew 23? What do you think it means that they were trying to "disqualify" the believers in Colossae? Does this still happen today?
  - The bottom line is that these legalists have an "unspiritual mind." (v. 18) What, according to verse 19, does this mean?
  - What are these various man-made rules based on? (v. 22)
  - How is it that these various rules "have the appearance of wisdom"? Do you think this is why every religion on the world (other than Christianity) is based on man-made rules?

## Application:

Take some time this week to really examine your heart with respect to legalism—and your natural tendency to LIKE various rules. How prone are you to judge others according the rules that you think are right to live by? Ask the Lord to give you a truly spiritual and faithful heart.