

Introduction:

Good Morning!

ME:

- Over the years, I have heard countless stories from people who say they rejected Christianity.
- And almost every time, when I listen carefully, they are not rejecting Jesus or the true gospel.
- So much of the time, they are reacting to a version of Christianity they experienced, filled with excessive rules and extra expectations.
- These rules are not taught in scripture, but Christians adopt them like they are scripture and if you don't follow them, then your salvation may be in question.
- Things like:
 - Do not dance because dancing leads to kissing.
 - Do not play cards because it is too close to gambling.
 - Do not watch sports because it will become an idol.
 - Tattoos and piercings are forbidden.
 - You must always wear your best clothes on Sunday because you are meeting with the King.
 - Never drink alcohol b/c you don't want someone to stumble, and so on
 - For many people, faith did not feel like freedom. It felt like pressure.
 - This idea of adding rules that aren't in the Bible is what we call legalism.
 - **Legalism is adding requirements to the gospel that God did not require and then treating those requirements as necessary for belonging, salvation, or spiritual legitimacy.**
 - It creates a burden that Jesus never gave – and in fact, died to relieve us of.

- And being legalistic, may just sound like common sense and wisdom because it seems like the rules are just to create big boundaries arounds sin, therefore, why go in those boundaries? Why get close to sin?
- Legalism is adding rules Jesus never gave and then calling them obedience.
- But calling them common sense, or framing them like “real Christians don’t do this...” is dangerous and misrepresents the gospel we preach.
- **Legalism stunts the maturity of disciples, implies the gospel and the Holy Spirit aren’t sufficient, and implies that scripture itself is incomplete.**

WE:

- Disagreeing about how to live out faith is not the problem. That is normal and even healthy.
- The problem comes when secondary or tertiary issues get elevated into primary ones.
- The problem comes when personal convictions become universal requirements.
- The problem comes when shame and condemnation get layered onto people who are trying to follow Jesus.
- Romans 8:1 reminds us there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- And yet many believers live as if condemnation is the air they breathe.
- If we are honest, we have all felt the tension between grace and rules at some point.
- **We need to confront legalism in our lives because when grace is replaced with extra rules, following Jesus becomes a burden instead of a joy, and Acts 15 shows us how to protect the freedom Christ gave.**

GOD:

- **Turn to ACTS 15: Here’s what is going to happen in this chapter:**

- **Paul & Barnabas have returned from their first missionary journey, and are back in Antioch (the first one)**
- **Some Jews show up, and they have been teaching their own views:
Gentiles need be circumcised and follow the law of Moses.**
- **Paul & Barnabas argue that's not the case, but now there's confusion**
- **They travel to Jerusalem to ask Peter & James.**
- **They confirm what Paul and Barnabas were saying, and emphasise the importance of loving your neighbor and Jews and gentiles living in unity.**
- **Let's read it:**

ACTS Chapter 15

¹ But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. ³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

⁶ The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. ⁷ And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now,

therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

12And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. 14Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

16“After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;
I will rebuild its ruins,
and I will restore it,
17that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,
says the Lord, who makes these things 18known from of old.’

19Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. 21For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

22Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, 23with the following letter:

- Then it repeats the conversation in the letter, and they send the group back with the response.
- Let's see what we can learn from the passage here, and then see how that applies to our challenge of legalism.

What We See...

- **First is to clarify what is in question:**
 - 2 things: Circumcision and Following the Law of Moses
 - Circumcision was a sign of belonging to the covenant God had with the Jews
 - The Law of Moses is the 613 laws in the Old Testament, from the 10 commandments to not boiling a goat in its mother's milk, to stoning someone who steals your sheep.
 - We are told in the first verse that they are claiming if you are to belong to the new covenant and receive salvation, then gentiles have to do these things.
- **Second we see Peter's response:**
 - He reminds that God himself confirmed the Gentiles were to be included, but never put those requirements on them.
 - He also calls out that trying to say they should be circumcised and follow the law is actually "putting God to the test"
 - Not believing the confirmation that He has already given
 - He speaks of the Law as a yolk or a burden
 - And they have not been able to bear it this whole time.

- **(Teach about the law here)** What parts of the law do we obey today?

Civil Ceremonial, Moral – None!

Jesus fulfilled the WHOLE LAW, because we could never.

- (Lots of confusion for believers today)

Now we follow the Way of the Spirit, or the Law of Christ (Love God, Neighbour, Self)

- **Third is that we see in the final response 4 laws to pass on to the gentiles:**

- Avoid idols, sexual immorality, meat that's been strangled, and blood.
- These seem arbitrary and random, and are quite interesting to explore. Through further study we learn:
 - These are not a new mini 10 commandments that now get taught everywhere. In fact in 1 Corinthians, Paul actually teaches that it is OKAY to eat meat sacrificed to idols. His response actually sheds light on why these 4 laws are highlighted here.
 - They come from Leviticus chapter 17 & 18 that specifically references believing gentiles.
 - Ultimately these laws are ones that are meant to unite Jewish and gentile believers by respecting the Jewish persons background.
 - James' response emphasises that the Law of Moses is taught every week to the Jews. These 4 in particular were very culturally present issues that surrounded the Jews.
 - By following these 4 things, the gentiles would foster unity with the Jews, removing cultural and religious barriers that would cause conflict, and
 - And allow them to better reach the Jews with the gospel.
- Now you may notice that these 4 rules seem like "extra rules" like the legalism we talked about earlier, but there is a distinct difference:
 - These rules are not tied to salvation, belonging, or holiness.
 - These rules are about being a family

- They were asking for a temporary sacrifice of rights so that Jews and Gentiles could actually eat together.
- They weren't saying, 'You're a bad Christian if you eat blood.' They were saying, 'Don't eat blood in front of your Jewish brother because it will break the relationship.'
- Legalism focuses on the Rule; Acts 15 focuses on the Relationship.

YOU:

- Every believer has convictions, but not every conviction is meant to be a condition for belonging.
- **In the legalistic mindset, an extra rule is like an insurance policy, in that it doesn't hurt to have it, and it might save you. But in reality, extra-biblical rules are not neutral; they carry a heavy theological cost:**
 - **Rules stunt maturity**
 - If you never take the training wheels off your bike, you never learn to balance.
 - When Christians avoid sin because of a checklist of rules or fear of the outcome, they never develop spiritual discernment.
 - For instance, when someone doesn't drink alcohol because they think "Good Christians shouldn't do that" they are just being compliant.
 - However, if they know they have the freedom to drink, but choose to moderate or abstain based on their own conscience of love for others, that person is being transformed.
 - This is the renewing of the minds Romans 12 talks about.
- Another theological cost is that legalism **implies that the Gospel, scripture, and Holy Spirit are not sufficient to guide us**

- The additional rules we make provide us a false sense of security by making us feel holy or righteous because we checked a box.
- Meanwhile our hearts might then be filled with pride, greed, malice, or ignoring the needy – the very things Jesus actually cares about.
- We end up focusing on external compliance rather than internal transformation that truly matters.
- **Legalism also implies the authority of is insufficient**
 - When we add "best practices" to Scripture and then treat them as mandates, we're actually undermining the authority of God's Word
 - Think about it this way: if God is the ultimate Authority and He deliberately chose not to forbid things like tattoos or card games, who are we to "improve" on His moral code?
 - adding to God's Law is just as dangerous as taking away from it
 - Both actions make the same claim that God's Word is somehow incomplete
 - God's word is sufficient! So when we make up new rules we have to ask "are we trusting God's wisdom, or are we trusting our own?"

Healing call

- Jesus didn't come to give us more rules, he died to fulfill the law!
- Legalism tells you that if you build enough fences and walk far enough away from the line of sin, you'll eventually make yourself holy enough for God.
- But the Gospel tells us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
- Our salvation is secure in Him, not in our ability to avoid dancing, cards, or tattoos
- We don't need more human fences to keep us safe; we need the Spirit of God to keep us faithful.
- So let's stop adding weights that Jesus never intended for you to carry

- Trust that the Holy Spirit is powerful enough to guide you, that Scripture is sufficient to teach you, and that God's grace is enough to transform you
- And invite others into the freedom Christ offers, not the burden of your own making

Maybe you have been burned by the extra rules.

Maybe you grew up in a very strict household.

Maybe you have struggled in adding rules to your faith and forcing those rules on others or even your kids.

Maybe you've judged someone's faith because they got a tattoo, or had a drink, or didn't dress the way you thought they should

If that's you, God is inviting you to lay that down and to release the control and trust that He can guide His children without your added requirements

- Others of you have been on the receiving end. Told you weren't a "real Christian" because you didn't measure up to someone's extra standards
- You've lived under condemnation and shame, believing God's love depends on following unwritten rules
- If that's you, God wants to heal that today. To lift that burden off your shoulders
- Jesus said in Matthew 11:28: "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest, for my yolk is easy and my burden is light."
- So right now, bring this to God. If you've been adding rules, confess it and ask for His help to extend grace
- If you've been carrying the shame of legalism, picture yourself taking that weight off and leaving it at the feet of Jesus

- Romans 8:1 says "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"
- You are loved, you are accepted, you are His - not because you followed all the rules, but because of Jesus
- Let's take a moment in silence, just between you and God, to lay these burdens down

Father, thank You for Your Word and the freedom we have in Christ.

Thank You that salvation is not about our ability to follow extra rules, but about Your grace poured out for us through Jesus.

Help us to trust that Your Word is sufficient, that Your Spirit is powerful enough to guide us, and that Your gospel is enough to transform us.

Guard us against adding burdens You never intended, and free us from burdens others have placed on us.

Give us wisdom to know the difference between Your commands and human traditions.

Help us to walk in love; loving You with all our hearts, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and extending the same grace to others that You've so freely given to us.

May we be a church marked not by extra rules, but by Your grace, truth, and transforming power.

We pray this in the freedom-bringing name of Jesus,

Amen.

Benediction

Paul dives into this again throughout Galatians

Galatians 5 says "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." **13**For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. **14**For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.