

Rejecting Legalism

Session 11 • Matthew 12:1-14



ENGAGE

PREPARE: Display **Pack Item 3** (Poster: *Jesus's Mission*) on a focal wall. Make copies of **Pack Item 9** (Handout: *Praying Scripture in Matthew's Gospel*) and **Pack Item 14** (Handout: *Legalism Worksheet*).

INTRODUCE: Call on a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 99.

ASK: What situation can you think of where laws and regulations were administered when mercy might have been a better approach? (p. 99)

SAY: *We have laws to protect us and to keep our society secure. Parents make rules for the benefit of everyone living in the house. Teachers establish rules in classrooms so students can learn without distractions. But, in every setting, we need to leave room for mercy and grace—not just the letter of the law.*

EXAMINE: Explain that only focusing on the letter of the law without accounting for grace and mercy is called “legalism.” Note that legalism is not just a social challenge but a spiritual one. Summarize the following information to provide more insight into hypocrisy and legalism:

- Legalism and license stand at opposite poles of the same problem: hypocrisy. Legalism requires strict adherence to the letter of the law and traditions. License uses opposition to legalism as an excuse for self-indulgence. Both reveal hypocrisy: the first because breaking one law means breaking them all and the second because people want the freedom to sin without consequence. Hypocrisy involves both being something you're not and demanding of others what you excuse in yourself (Matt. 23:1-4). Jesus condemned the Pharisees for a hypocrisy that held others accountable to the law while ignoring their own responsibilities to God.

TRANSITION: *In this session, we'll examine how Jesus responded to hypocrisy in the form of legalism and discover why we must be aware of the dangers it presents in our lives.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Call on a volunteer to read **Matthew 12:1-2** as the group considers why the Pharisees saw a violation of the law.

CONTEXT: Encourage one or two volunteers to share what they know about the Sabbath in Scripture. Summarize the following information to offer more explanation:

- **(12:1-2)** Sabbath rest was a centerpiece in Judaism. But over time, religious leaders moved away from God's intention for the Sabbath. Mosaic law forbade harvesting or reaping on the Sabbath (Ex. 34:21), but rabbinical traditions listed another thirty-nine prohibitions that served as a "hedge of protection." These man-made religious rules were not part of God's commands. Although the disciples only plucked a little grain by hand, the Pharisees viewed this as a kind of harvesting and, as such, was contrary to their understanding of the law

EXPLAIN: Point out that, according to the law, the disciples were permitted to pick some grain in the fields and eat it. Emphasize that the Pharisees' problem was rooted in their own interpretations and tradition, not anything God actually intended for the law.

ASK: What role should religious tradition play in the practice of our faith? (p. 101)

DISCUSS: Direct adults to suggest important traditions believers still observe today and record their ideas on the board. Lead a brief discussion on the origins of those traditions. Note that traditions that don't come directly from Scripture aren't necessarily bad.

SAY: *We just have to be careful about letting our human traditions take priority over what God has clearly revealed in His Word. And we have to make sure that we don't use our own standards to judge the righteousness or sinfulness of others.*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 12:3-8 aloud while adults determine how Jesus countered the Pharisees' criticisms.

ASK: What can we learn from Jesus's response? (p. 101) Point out that Jesus's opponents had spent their lives studying the Scriptures, but Jesus used the Scriptures they knew so well to prove they were wrong. Note the importance of a solid understanding of the Bible.

RECAP: Summarize the content in Day 2 of **Daily Exploration** (p. 103) to explain Jesus's illustrations in verses 3-5. Share the following information to highlight Jesus's statement in verse 6:

- **(12:6)** *If Sabbath rules could be set aside for temple service, then it makes sense that Sabbath rules could be set aside in the presence of something greater than the temple. The word "something" referred to the Person of Jesus and the nature of His mission. If priests were exempt from obeying Sabbath rules because of temple service, then the disciples who serve the One greater than the temple were guiltless as well. If the Pharisees could have seen Jesus for who He is, they would have seen the error of their ways.*

ASK: What do these verses teach us about Jesus and His expectations of His followers? (p. 101)

TRANSITION: Remind adults that God calls His people to respond with mercy and love, not judgment and criticism.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Matthew 12:9-14 aloud while the group listens for indications that the Pharisees had shifted from being spectating critics to active opponents.

EXAMINE: Allow volunteers to share things that stuck out to them from the verses. Supplement the discussion with the following:

- **(12:9-10)** *The Pharisees who confronted Jesus in the fields were probably leaders in this synagogue. Note that some scholars believe they used the man as a “set up” in order to accuse Jesus of breaking the Mosaic law. Mark and Luke pointed out that the Pharisees were watching Jesus closely (Mark 3:2; Luke 6:7). The word “accuse” means to charge, condemn, or critically judge. In fact, the English word “categorize” comes from the Greek word for accuse. The Pharisees wanted to “categorize” Jesus as a lawbreaker.*

ASK: How might the authority of Jesus be perceived as a threat? (p. 101)

RECAP: Note that Jesus turned the tables on the religious leaders. The Pharisees wanted to put Jesus into a theological corner but found themselves trapped instead. Jesus further revealed their hypocrisy by emphasizing that “a person is worth far more than a sheep.” So, if it was acceptable to rescue their animal, God would not be offended by helping another human being.



The Synagogue

The synagogue played a central role in the lives of first-century Jews. Scan here to view a reconstruction of a typical synagogue.

EXPLAIN: Point out that instead of accepting the truth, the Pharisees rejected Jesus's message. Note the irony of condemning Jesus for doing good on the Sabbath, yet plotting evil against Him on the same day. Affirm that legalism and hypocrisy can lead to devastating and dehumanizing attitudes and actions.

CHALLENGE

REFLECT: Distribute copies of **Pack Item 14** (*Handout: Legalism Worksheet*). Allow adults to work in teams of three or four to reflect on how legalism shows up in our world and how the Bible responds to those efforts. Allow each team to report on their work. Remind adults that legalism is rooted in hypocrisy and inevitably erodes our compassion for others.

DISCUSS: Direct attention to the **Apply the Text** questions on page 101. Encourage adults to be sensitive to the needs of others and to seek opportunities to show mercy instead of criticism.

PRAY: Urge adults to continue praying these verses back to God during the week using the **Explore the Bible Prayer Guide**. Close the session in prayer.

AFTER THE SESSION

Send the group a text or an email. Encourage them to read and reflect on the **Apply the Text** question from page 105 as they seek God's help in rooting out their own legalistic and hypocritical tendencies. Assure them that you are praying for them as they work through these issues in their lives.