

Jesus vs. Legalism: Obedience from the Heart

V Purpose of This Study

To understand how Jesus defines and rebukes **legalism**, and to distinguish it from true, heartfelt obedience that honors God.

SECTION 1: Definitions

X What Is Legalism?

- Legalism = Adding human traditions or rules to God's law and treating them
 as binding
- Relying on external works or rituals to appear righteous
- Substituting performance for relationship with God
- Obedience without love, humility, or faith

What Is True Obedience?

- Heart-based, not just behavior-based (Matthew 22:37–40)
- Rooted in love for God (John 14:15)
- Leads to justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23)
- Flows from faith, not self-righteousness (Luke 18:9-14)

SECTION 2: Core Scriptures on Legalism

Passage	Key Phrase	What Jesus Teaches
Matthew 23:1–36	"Woe to you hypocrites!"	Legalism burdens others and focuses on outward appearance
Mark 7:6-13	"You nullify the word of God by your traditions"	Legalism replaces God's commands with man-made rules
Luke 11:39-42	"Inside you are full of greed and wickedness"	Obedience must cleanse the heart, not just actions
Matthew 15:8–9	"Their hearts are far from me"	Worship becomes meaningless when based on rules, not relationship
Luke 18:9-14	Pharisee vs. Tax Collector	Righteousness comes from humility, not performance
John 5:39–40	"You refuse to come to me"	Studying Scripture without seeking Christ leads to spiritual blindness

SECTION 3: Discussion Questions

- 1. What are some modern-day examples of legalism in Christian life or church culture?
- 2. Why do you think Jesus was so strong in His rebuke of the Pharisees?
- 3. Have you ever obeyed God just "out of duty" without your heart being engaged? What happened?
- 4. How can we guard against legalism while still striving to obey God's commands?

5. In what ways does true obedience bring **freedom** instead of **burden**?

SECTION 4: Heart Check – Self-Examination

Question	Legalism Tendency	Obedience from the Heart
Why do I obey God?		Because I love Him (John 14:15)
Who gets the glory?	Myself ("Look at me")	God alone
How do I respond to others' weaknesses?	Judgment or comparison	Mercy and support
Am I more focused on appearances?	Yes – impress others	No – please God (Gal. 1:10)
Is my obedience joyful?	No – it feels like pressure	Yes – it flows from love and trust

SECTION 5: Application Steps

- 1. Confess any areas of prideful or external-only obedience
- 2. Meditate on key verses like Micah 6:8, Psalm 51:16–17, and John 14:15
- 3. Replace performance with presence spend quiet time with Jesus daily
- 4. Prioritize the heart behind every act of worship or obedience
- 5. Encourage others toward grace and truth, not guilt and law-keeping

Memory Verse

"Woe to you... you give a tenth... but neglect justice, mercy, and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others."

— *Matthew 23:23*

III Legalism vs. True Obedience Chart

Feature	Legalism	True Obedience
Source	Self-effort, pride	Faith, love for God
Goal	Impress or control	Please and honor God
Focus	Rules and appearances	Heart and relationship
Fruit	Burden, judgment	Joy, peace, compassion