



Once again in this passage, the Pharisees are looking to discredit Jesus. The concept of Sabbath was central to Jewish life – a weekly gift of rest meant for physical, mental and spiritual well-being and renewal. As an observant Jew, Jesus knew the meaning and intent of this principle, which he too undertook and was not seeking to undermine by his words in this passage.

The Pharisees however had turned this God-given principle into a legalistic and harsh burden. ‘Your followers are doing wrong’ they chorused to Jesus. Their hypocrisy was exposed by him. The Sabbath law was meant to keep people and their needs at its heart. This was reflected in Jesus’ healing of the man in the subsequent passage.

Legalism – following the letter of the law without regard for its proper purpose – promotes self-righteousness. When we forget humanity and maintain a rigid view of rules, we are effectively using our efforts to obtain salvation, rather than relying on God’s grace. Thus, we say to God ‘Jesus death and resurrection was not enough - we must be busy doing this and observing that’.

Our relationship with God is not dependant on rule keeping. Once we are in a relationship with God, we want to follow those rules to please Him. His laws are written on our heart and not in our head. On the other hand, legalism relentlessly squashes grace, mercy and humility. In the New Testament letters Paul warns us that such legalism will lead to people ‘biting and devouring one another’. In Colossians 2 v 8 he warns

*‘see to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition’*

As we seek to avoid the trap of legalism, let us remind ourselves we are nothing more and nothing less than ‘complete in Christ (Colossians 2 v 10). His love is everything we need.