

## Free To Follow: Rediscovering Jesus Beyond Religion

### Part 3: Jesus > Rules: Why Religion Keeps Getting It Wrong

Matthew 12:1–14 (NLT)

**Summary:** Jesus challenged rule-based religion by putting people over rules, and proved that real faith is about love, not legalism.

#### Main Ideas:

Rules have a role, but when they become the goal, something is wrong.

Too often, religious rules are used to control.

Religious rule-keeping has often prioritized conformity over compassion.

Jesus doesn't love rules. He loves people.

Knowing and following rules doesn't make you godly. Treating people like God treats them makes you godly.

Religion tends to prioritize rules over people.

Jesus prioritizes people over everything.

There is no rule more important than the person right in front of you.

If the version of Christianity you've experienced doesn't make you feel free... It's not Christianity.

The rules were never the point. The point has always been... people.

#### Invitation:

At least once a day every day this week, pray: Jesus, show me your love for me. And make me a person who prioritizes people over rules.

#### Discussion Questions:

1. What was your experience with rules growing up... at home, school, or church? Were they mostly helpful or harmful?
2. How do you typically respond when someone breaks a rule you think is important? (Be honest!)
3. Reread the story in Matthew 12:1-14. What stands out most to you?
4. What do you think it means to follow Jesus instead of following rules? Is that freeing or scary... or both?
5. How can your group pray with you this week?

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#### Transcript:

**ME:** I used to be a middle school social studies teacher.

I became a teacher partly b/c of some teachers I had growing up... not b/c they inspired me, but b/c they didn't.

It seemed they became teachers not to impact the next generation or inspire young minds...

- BUt b/c they loved making and enforcing rules
- For them, the point of school wasn't to learn—it was to comply.

And I get it, rules have a role

- Keep us from getting in car accidents or arguing about how to play Monopoly

Rules have a role, but when they become the goal, something is wrong.

If you've ever had someone in authority use rules like weapons...

- You know the frustration/anger/powerless feeling I'm talking about.

Now, unfortunately, this type of "rule-obsession" has become firmly entrenched in religion, too.

**WE:** And when you add religion to rules... things go bad quickly.

Too often, religious rules are used to control.

Sometimes, church people even try to force their religious rules on people who never signed up for them

- It can be absurd.

I remember as a teenager being in church...

- An elderly woman turned around during the "greeting time."
- Said, "Young man, you need to take your hat off in church."
- What she didn't know was... I was the pastor's kid.
- Not mad she told me what to do... but that she didn't even stop to wonder if I was new... looking to see what Jesus was about.

Maybe you've experienced that...

You've walked into a church or talked to someone with big "God opinions," and immediately there's this pressure.

- The questions. The checklist. The expectations.

Not to be real... To be right.

Here's the truth: Religious rule-keeping has often prioritized conformity over compassion.

And so many people walk away from Jesus—not b/c of Jesus—but b/c of the endless rules tied to religion.

Maybe that's you. Maybe it's your kids. Maybe it's your best friend.

But here's the good news: You're not the only one frustrated.

This prioritizing of rules frustrates and even infuriates Jesus, too.

This obsession with control isn't new. It was alive and well in the time of Jesus.

But for Jesus, people always came before rules.

Think about it... if you know the story... who killed Jesus?

- Not kids wearing hats in church... but self-righteous rule enforcers.

He refused to be controlled and refused to allow others to be controlled by overbearing religious rules.

In a world where religion said ‘follow the rules or get out,’ Jesus did something completely different.

So today, let’s look at a time when the religious crowd tried to catch Jesus breaking one of their prized rules... and how Jesus flipped the whole thing.

Let’s see what real, freeing love looks like—because Jesus doesn’t love rules. He loves people.

**GOD:** So one day, Jesus and his followers are hungry as they’re walking through some grainfields.

**12:1 (NLT)** *At about that time Jesus was walking through some grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, so they began breaking off some heads of grain and eating them.*

They’re hungry and need a snack... like my kids every 20 min this summer.

Not stealing, not farming. Just a quick bite.

But the Pharisees... the greatest rule followers of the day... are not happy.

**12:2 (NLT)** *But some Pharisees saw them do it and protested, ‘Look, your disciples are breaking the law by harvesting grain on the Sabbath.’*

Just so we are all on the same page... From the beginning of the Jewish religion... 10 commandments, they weren’t supposed to do any work on the Sabbath.

The original point was to have a day to rest and trust God, instead of working yourself to the bone.

But over time, the religious leaders turned the Sabbath from a gift into a loaded trap.

There were lists—39 categories (each with its own subcategories) of things you couldn’t do.

- Going beyond what was commanded in the law of Moses.
- And “reaping,” or “grabbing a snack,” was technically work.

So, the Pharisees jump out of the bushes and yell, “Ah ha Gotcha... dirty sinners!”

And Jesus... being Jesus... answers with a story they already know.

### **12:3-4 (Paraphrased)**

“Haven’t you read what David (you’re ultimate hero) did when his men were hungry? They ate bread that was technically off-limits... and God didn’t smite them.”

And besides, he says... “even the priests worked on the Sabbath in the temple... and God never saw that as breaking the rules.”

- Why? Because it served people.

Then he says something that should've made every Pharisee lose control...

**12:6 (NLT) "I tell you, there is one here who is even greater than the Temple!"**

Meaning: "This thing you built your whole religion around? I'm bigger than that."

But he doesn't stop there...

**12:7 (NLT) "But you would not have condemned my innocent disciples if you knew the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.'"**

Same passage he quoted in our story last time.

He's quoting Hosea... a Jewish prophet who yelled at people for mistaking rule-following for real love.

Knowing and following rules doesn't make you godly. Treating people like God treats them makes you godly.

A godly person acts as God would act.

- Never-ending, never giving up love, forgiveness, acceptance, worth, mercy.

Godly isn't knowing. Godly is doing. Knowing it is not the same as doing it/Being it.

And then Jesus says something mind-blowing...

**12:8 (NLT) "For the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!"**

Son of Man- His favorite name for himself (from the prophet Daniel describing the one from God)

And he says, "This holy day of yours? Yeah, I'm in charge of that... I invented it. I get to say what it means."

Who says something like that?

- Either he was delusional, power-hungry... or he really was God.
- Which do you think Jesus is?

But even after pointing to their own Scriptures...

- Quoting their own stories...
- Even after claiming authority over one of their holiest traditions
- They still don't get it.

So Jesus doesn't argue back.

- He doesn't defend or explain.
- He simply shows it.

He walks into their synagogue... And starts a revolution with compassion.

**12:9–10 (NLT)** *Then Jesus went over to their synagogue, where he noticed a man with a deformed hand. The Pharisees asked Jesus, ‘Does the law permit a person to work by healing on the Sabbath?’ (They were hoping he would say yes, so they could bring charges against him.)*

What slimy, conniving snakes—so lost in their rules that they couldn’t even see a real person in front of them.

They’re not even subtle. Religion tends to prioritize rules over people.

This man with a deformed hand... is a setup.

- A test. Not a person. Not an image bearer of God in need of love.
- Just a trap for Jesus.

Ever experienced that?

- Most bad religious experiences are b/c someone prioritized a rule over you.

But that’s not Jesus

- Jesus prioritizes people over everything.
- Jesus sees the man... not the trap. Not the rule.
- He sees the loneliness, the pain, and the years of being overlooked.

And he’s not going to let these guys get away with what they are trying to do.

Now, usually when we read this section, as with the rest of the Bible, we give Jesus a meek/gentle voice.

- I don’t think that’s what happens here...
- I think Jesus is angry/frustrated and standing up for this man and everyone else these rule-keepers had abused with their rules.

So he asks them a question they can’t squirm out of.

**12:11-12 (NLT)** *“If you had a sheep that fell into a well on the Sabbath, wouldn’t you work to pull it out? Of course you would. And how much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Yes, the law permits a person to do good on the Sabbath.”*

Then Jesus turns to the man... I imagine he takes a second and looks him in the eye, with a gentle smile and probably a wink to let him know everything is going to be ok.

The room goes silent. Everyone’s watching, holding their breath.

- Especially the man with the broken hand.

So Jesus basically says... You think you can trap me? Here, Matthew, hold my wine...

**12:13 (NLT)** *Then he said to the man, ‘Hold out your hand.’ So the man held out his hand, and it was restored, just like the other one!*

Jesus didn’t just talk about mercy. He embodied it.

Jesus always picks the person over the policy. The need over the rulebook.

He proves that God's heart is for PEOPLE, not rules.

- Compassion, empathy, love, and acceptance are always the right answer.

**There is no rule more important than the person right in front of you.**

God's love, mercy, and power are on full display. An amazing miracle has just happened right in front of everyone

And how do the Pharisees respond?

- Fall to their knees in awe?
- Celebrate with the healed man?
- Worship the one who just made a crippled hand new again?

Not quite...

**12:14 Then the Pharisees called a meeting to plot how to kill Jesus.**

The Pharisees had a choice- They could've admitted they were wrong, joined the party

Instead, they don't throw a party... they start planning a murder..

B/c their religion is threatened... their power is threatened.

Religion often replaces love with rules and blinds you to the actual needs of people around you

And that brings us face to face with our own stories...

**YOU:** We are in this story in two ways...

- We are the man with the deformed hand
- And at the same time, we can easily be the Pharisees.

Ever felt like that man?

- Used. Invisible. Labeled. Discarded.
- Maybe your past has kept you at a distance.

You just want to be helped and healed, to have the life you hope is out there...

Maybe you've only been handed rules... and if you didn't follow them perfectly, you felt like you didn't belong.

Religious people might have used rules and guilt to control you... enslave you to be who *THEY* want you to be.

That's not Jesus.

Listen, Jesus didn't come to enslave you to a new set of rules... he came to free you.

- To be who you were always created to be.
- To free you to enjoy him and the life he offers you

**If the version of Christianity you've experienced doesn't make you feel free... It's not Christianity.**

You are invited to enjoy a life of love, peace, purpose, and freedom.

- Not by following rules but by simply following Jesus.

Now, at the same time, many of us also have more Pharisee in us than we'd like to admit

Let me ask you a tough question...

- When someone else bends or even breaks the rules you think are "essential..."
- When someone doesn't live up to your spiritual, moral, or behavioral expectations...
- How do you react?

Mercy or Judgment?

Self-reflection... maybe I'm missing something? Or anger, defensiveness, condemnation?

Jesus showed there's a better way. The way of love.

**John 15:12 This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you.**

Everything is wrapped up in that.

- Every NT command is simply a picture of what love looks like in real life.

When you're free of the rules, you're not free to just do whatever...

- It's better... you're free to love... to be empowered to love.

So let's put this into practice and practice following Jesus, not just rules.

Invitation: **at least once a day every day this week, pray...**

**Jesus, show me your love for me. And make me a person who prioritizes people over rules.**

And then do it.

- Love someone who challenges your tidy rules.
- Sit with someone who breaks your categories.
- Extend grace to someone, maybe even yourself, who's tired of trying to measure up.

Jesus' love and grace aren't just the start... they're the whole thing.

And if guilt and shame come to you or you wonder if it's actually ok to accept this person... Remember-

- There is nothing you have done/will do that Jesus forgot to die for.
- And the same death he died for you... He died for them.

**WE:** Imagine if we were a people known not for what we require... but for the love we lavish.

- Not for what we police... but for how we pursue.
- Not for the fences we build... but for the tables we set.

Imagine if the church became the place where people could come as they are...

- Not to perform... but to be seen, and loved.

Imagine if every church was built not on rules or control...

- but on the kind of love that heals hands, opens hearts, and makes room at every table.

What if you were free to love... without worrying about who is or isn't checking the boxes?

What if you stopped measuring your worth by your mistakes... or by someone else's behavior?

What if we practiced a faith that didn't just believe in mercy...

- But lived it... out loud?

Not everyone will get it. Just like the Pharisees didn't.

But Jesus does.

- He still sees the outsiders.
- He still defends the wounded.
- He still breaks the rules that keep people out.
- And he still invites us to do the same.

That kind of community can change the world.

And it starts with simply deciding:

- Jesus over religion.
- People over policies.
- Love over rules.

Jesus didn't come to enforce rules... He came to restore people.

And when we follow him... that's our calling too.

B/c... The rules were never the point. The point has always been... people.