

BEHOLDING CHRIST . . . THE SON OF GOD

An Exposé of Legalism

John 5:1–18

SEARCHING
THE
SCRIPTURES

STUDY



LET'S BEGIN HERE

John 5 opens with Jesus back in Jerusalem—a city alive amid the festivities of one of the Jewish holy days. Like most urban centers today, the place was home to countless broken people afflicted by disease, trapped in poverty, and haunted by the injustices of a society that shunned them. You'd think that Jerusalem would be a sanctuary for the desperate to find much-needed compassion. Not so! The place was steeped in legalism—an oppressive brand of Judaism that considered physical afflictions to be God's penalty for sin (John 9:2).

This harsh interpretation of the Law was promoted primarily by the *Pharisees*, a highly influential group of religious leaders who overloaded people with unbending rules rather than lifting them from despair. Enter: Jesus! The Word, full of grace and truth, who became human and who entered our sin-wrecked world (1:14).

Chuck Swindoll offers us a balanced perspective:

Law and grace are opposite living standards. But this is not saying that there was no grace for those who lived under the Law . . . nor that there are no laws for those of us who live under grace. The New Testament mentions *law*: “the law of the Spirit of life” (Romans 8:2 NASB), “the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2), “the perfect law . . . of liberty” (James 1:25 NASB), and “the royal law” (2:8). The New Testament “laws” are the direct, specific instructions—stated commands—expected of the believer today who wishes to live in obedience to Jesus Christ. Grace never means nor promotes a do-as-you-please philosophy nor a loose life of selfishness, sinfulness, and license. Romans 6:12–18 confirms this fact.

Quotable

We need to understand legalism before we can really see it for the evil that it is.

— Charles R. Swindoll



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S10
1

The major differences, however, between living under law and living under grace have to do with the *recipients* of the commands and the *motivation* prompting obedience.

	Recipients	Motivation
Under Law (not for today)	<i>The Israelites</i> Over 600 stated commands found in the Mosaic Law	Basically: “I have to” Prompted by <i>fear</i> . . . empowered by the <i>flesh</i>
Under Grace (for today)	<i>Believers in Jesus Christ</i> Hundreds of equally specific principles and commands found in the New Testament	Basically: “I want to” Prompted by <i>love</i> . . . empowered by the <i>Holy Spirit</i>

*The preceding paragraphs and chart were taken from a hand-out Charles R. Swindoll provided to the congregation of the First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton, California as part of his series on the Gospel of John originally preached in 1975.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

Before you begin your study, take a moment to seek the Lord in prayer; ask Him to open your mind and heart to His Word. Be willing, even in this time of study, to pause, reflect, and honestly respond in obedience to anything He may ask of you. In his book, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, Chuck offers us a helpful reminder.

We must never forget what the writer of Hebrews declares:

For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. (Hebrews 4:12)

The living Word of God must penetrate and probe our own souls before we present it to others.¹

Now read John 5:1–20. Write down any initial impressions you have or something you read that speaks to you personally.





Observation: What Do You See?

In this passage, John offers us a front-row seat to one of the most touching miracles in the Gospels—the story of Jesus healing the man by the pool of Bethsaida.

Imagine the scene: Based on John’s description of the setting, what would you see? What sounds and perhaps smells might you experience?



Searching the Scriptures Tool

Observation helps us gain a broad view of the passage by identifying details the author includes about the setting of the story, the people involved, and the environment in which it took place. In narrative, for instance, authors provide indications of time of day, names of towns or regions, even weather conditions or geographic indicators, such as an “area east of the Jordan River, where John was baptizing” (John 1:28). Together, these clues provide a backdrop for interpreting the meaning of the passage.

What need was presented to Jesus in John 5:1–5? How was it presented?

What detail about the man’s condition did John share that demonstrates the significance of his physical need (John 5:5)?



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What was Jesus' response (John 5:6)?

According to the sick man, why could he not be made well (5:7)?

How did Jesus respond (5:8)?

What happened next (5:9)?

Why did the religious leaders object to the man's physical response to being healed (5:10)?



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4

The religious leaders' response to Jesus' miracle epitomizes the harsh attitude of legalism. Refusing to acknowledge the wonderful miracle, they instead insisted on indicting the man who had been healed for breaking the Sabbath. John sets up a classic literary contrast between the response of Jesus to the man's need and the reaction of the legalistic leaders to a clear demonstration of the power of God.



Interpretation and Correlation: Discovering the Meaning of the Story

At times, an author will use contrast as a literary device to point to the meaning of a passage. Embedded in the argument between Jesus and the religious leaders about His identity are important truths about the relationship between God the Son and God the Father and what should be an appropriate response to the ministry of Jesus.

Following the miracle, Jesus met the man He healed in the temple (John 5:14). The man then reported Christ's words back to the same group of religious leaders who had earlier chastised him for breaking the Sabbath command.

Describe a time in your life when you believed you were the victim of a judgmental attitude. How did it make you feel? What was your response?

Judgmental attitudes—when aimed at others—sadly cause undeserving people to feel harassed. How would you contrast Jesus' response to this man's desperate need with the response of the religious leaders?

How did Jesus respond to them? What did He claim in His response (5:17)?



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SEARCHING
THE
SCRIPTURES

STUDY

What did Jesus say about His Father and Himself to support His claim to be the Son of God?

How did the leaders respond to Jesus, and what charges did they level at Him (John 5:18)?

Let's correlate this episode with another one like it later in John's gospel. Read John 10:30. What claim did Jesus make about the relationship between Himself and God the Father? What similarities do you see between this scene and John 5?

How did the people respond to Jesus' claim (10:31–32)?

Look again at John 5:10. What connection can you make between John's statement about Jesus in these verses and what occurred in John 10:31–32?



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6



Application: Finding Yourself in the Story

Sometimes it helps to apply the truths of a Scripture lesson by thinking about where you'd fit into the story. In other words, in the account of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda, with whom would you most identify? From the list below, circle the description that best represents who you would be in the story. Then write a sentence or two explaining your choice.

- One among the crowd of crippled and hurting people
- A religious leader holding people accountable to the “rules”
- An indifferent bystander choosing to remain quiet and observing
- One of the disciples, unsure of how to respond
- The lame man offering reasons why healing is not possible

Below are three principles that emerge from this story. Following each one, write in your own words how they can be applied to your life.

To expose legalism, truth must emerge.

How can truth expose the error of legalism in a church setting? In your home? In your relationship to others?



To combat legalism, conviction must be employed.

How does maintaining a conviction about the truth help you confront errors in spiritual teaching, such as legalism?

To overcome legalism, grace must be embraced.

How can you embrace a more gracious attitude toward people who are different from you or who are living their lives apart from the Lord?



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for approaching me with grace and kindness rather than judgment and condemnation! Please form in me the mind and attitude Jesus has toward others who do not yet know You or who are just beginning their walk of faith. I ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2016), 210.



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SCRIPTURES

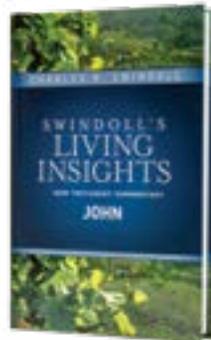
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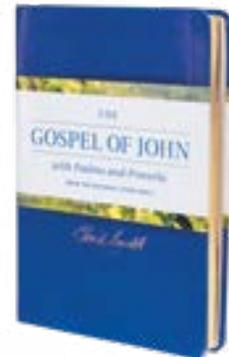
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For the 2018 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Mark Tobey in collaboration with Bryce Klabunde, executive vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.



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9