

## The Dangers of Legalism Matthew 15:1-20

How could those scribes and Pharisees be so clueless? For they were so concerned about the legalistic minutiae of religion, so busy sweating every single one of the details of the ceremonial law, so busy trying to achieve God's approval by following so many rules and regulations, many of which they had made up for themselves, that they missed the main point of the Scriptures they claimed to believe. For when Jesus, the One Whose life and ministry fulfilled all of those ceremonies and sacrifices they so scrupulously observed, stood right in front of them, they didn't even recognize Him as their Messiah, their Savior.

Worse yet, Jesus went so far as to call them a bunch of hypocrites – people who say one thing and do another. For the fact is that no sinful human being can possibly keep all of God's Law in his or her own strength. In fact, the more we try to justify ourselves by keeping whatever rules we are trying to follow, the greater our disappointment will be in our inevitable inconsistencies. Hypocrisy and legalism, it turns out, are two sides of the same coin.

But legalism and hypocrisy weren't just problems for the ancient Jews. No, there are plenty of people today who call themselves Christians who are following the same path toward frustration and futility, making up our own rules and trying to feel good about ourselves by following them.

Let's take for example the criticism that the Pharisees leveled at Jesus' disciples in today's passage – the fact that they didn't engage in ceremonial washing. Now, the Law of Moses did indeed require the priests to cleanse themselves in a very particular way before they offered sacrifices in the Tabernacle. But the religious leaders of Jesus' time had come to the conclusion that if a little washing was good, more would be better. And if washing was important for the priests, then it must be just as necessary for everyone else. So, the Pharisees made up a lot of rules about washing, and they expected everyone else to follow them. They were, as Jesus' quote from Isaiah puts it, "teaching as doctrines the commandments of men," and they were offended when Jesus' disciples didn't play along.

Well, what about us? Some of you may remember a time when these sorts of man-made exaggerations of God's law were widely observed. Jesus, for example, warned us about the danger of lustful glances, and so of course that means that Christians should wear modest clothing to help keep others from falling into sin. But the Victorians took this good idea to such an extreme that it became scandalous for women's skirts to be high enough to reveal an ankle. It was considered bad taste for a man to take off his jacket in public, even if he still had on a vest, a shirt, and an undershirt. A proper Biblical concern for modesty was thus distorted into a inflexible dress code, one that was literally stifling at least during these summer months.

Today, we see a similar mania for rule making most clearly in the arena of speech. Of course it's a Biblical idea to avoid offending people if possible – Paul tells us, after all, that we are to speak the truth in love. But today's culture piles up rule upon rule to the point that no one can ever quite know what to say, or what unintentional slip of the tongue will send an outraged listener into orbit.

And the rules keep changing at a dizzying pace, don't they? For example, Dr. Martin Luther King came to a rousing conclusion in his famous "I Have a Dream speech," appealing to "all of God's children,

black men and white men.” Well, you certainly can’t speak of all people as “men” these days. But who knows what the rules will be tomorrow?

In response to the speech police, Cleveland has decided to rename its baseball team the “Guardians,” and Washington D.C. still has no idea what to call its football team. And now we hear that classroom teachers have been threatened or even fired for using the wrong pronouns when addressing their students. Oh, no, the ancient Pharisees had no corner on the market for making up and trying to enforce ridiculous and onerous rules.

But if legalism often adds on to God’s perfect Law of love, thus deforming it into a wearisome burden, in the process it often reverses the clear intention of these commandments. Jesus gives us such an example in verses 4-6, pointing out how the scribes and Pharisees had cleverly constructed a way for adult children to avoid caring for their aged parents. Yes, the Pharisees knew the requirement of the Law of Moses that anything promised to God had to be given to Him. So, these crafty legalists reasoned that if an adult child said that some or all of his possessions were somehow devoted to the service of God, well then he couldn’t use that same property to care for his parents, could he? However hard it might be to imagine children wanting to cut off their parents’ means of support, the scribes and Pharisees thought they had devised a clever, even Biblical way to allow just this sort of thing to happen.

But notice how Jesus cuts through all of their rationalizations. The basis of the moral law, the Ten Commandments, makes it clear that we are to honor our parents. So, how could any vow be righteous if that vow prevented children from keeping this law? How could any human reasoning or tradition ever trump what God’s Word clearly says?

But unfortunately, it is still all too easy even for us Bible-believing Christians to rationalize away even the clearest of God’s commandments. Sure, we know that God tells us to take a day off every week to spend time with him, but we have all those chores to do, don’t we? Sure, we know that Jesus warned us about the danger of lustful looks, but don’t we have to keep up with current fashions, however revealing they might be? Sure, we know that God’s plan for marriage is one man and one woman for a lifetime. We know what Jesus said – the two shall become one flesh, and what God has joined together, let not man put asunder. But shouldn’t marriage be about happiness and personal fulfillment? That’s what the Romantics taught us, so if you aren’t in love any more, why go on pretending?

Oh yes, we’ve read the Ten Commandments. But are we capitalistic Americans just as scandalized by covetousness as we are by murder? We’ve studied the Sermon on the Mount, but how many of us genuinely try to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us? In short, are we allowing our common-sense, practical view of the world to make the Word of God of no effect? Are we really any better than those scribes and Pharisees, rationalizing away the teaching of Scripture so they could do what they wanted?

And this leads us to Jesus’ third criticism of the scribes and Pharisees, the one that should perhaps hit closest to home. For if legalists add to God’s commandments, making them onerous, and if legalists elevate human reasoning above the clear Word of God, they also miss the most important point God’s Law is intended to make – the need for personal repentance.

For think about it – legalists tend to define righteousness in terms of do’s and don’ts. They think that all you have to do to be okay in God’s sight is to do the do’s and don’t the don’ts. Now, the particulars of these do’s and don’ts vary quite a bit across time and space. Jesus, for example, pointed out the Pharisees’ obsession with the Old Testament dietary laws. In the days of Moses, God had told His people to avoid eating certain sorts of animals – primarily the ones that were not themselves particularly choosy about their own diets. God’s people weren’t supposed to eat catfish or pigs or eagles, probably because all of them regularly came into contact with dead animals and other unclean things. Thus, it is likely that God was trying to teach His people the importance of avoiding contact with death, and by extension, the sin that leads to death.

But through the years, Christians have been just as willing to overemphasize ceremonies while forgetting or neglecting their central meaning. We’ve already commented on the Victorians’ emphasis on the proper way to dress. More recently, some of our more conservative evangelical brethren were told, “Don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t chew and don’t go with girls who do.” And of course we Evangelical Presbyterians tend to define our do’s and don’ts in theological terms – as long as we do believe in the Five Points of Calvinism and don’t believe in dispensationalism or Arminianism, we feel pretty good about ourselves.

But what did Jesus say was the problem with the scribes and Pharisees? They were focusing so much on the details of the laws about food that they forgot their main point – a pure diet was supposed to encourage God’s people to pursue purity of heart and mind. Refusing to put things inside themselves that were physically unclean was supposed to remind them to put away from within themselves anything that was spiritually unclean.

And so in doing away with all those Old Testament food laws, Jesus wasn’t lowering the bar for Christian conduct – He was raising it. Indeed, in His relentless attack on legalism of all sorts, Jesus is insisting that His followers keep the main thing in mind – avoiding not the things outside us that might contaminate us, but the sinful thoughts and feelings inside ourselves. He wants us to focus on the real problem – not all the sinful things we might say and do, but on the sin within ourselves that motivates us to do and say all those wrong things.

For no matter what the Victorians said, the real problem isn’t how we dress ourselves on the outside – no, the real problem is our evil thoughts, the desire for adultery and fornication that comes from inside us. We may avoid drinking, smoking, chewing and going with the wrong kinds of girls (or boys), but if we tolerate covetousness, wickedness and deceit in our lives, such outward purity won’t make any difference. And even if all our theological ducks are in a row and we are in complete agreement with the Westminster Standards, that won’t do us any good if we allow complacency, pride, gluttony and sloth to fester within us.

Okay, so if legalism, if making up our own rules and following our own reason and experience only leads to hypocrisy, and if it won’t do any good for us to try harder so that God will be pleased with us, what are we supposed to do? How can we ever achieve the kind of holiness God requires of us? Well, we find the answer in our responsive reading, the passage Jesus quoted to the scribes and Pharisees, even though the so-called experts in God’s Word didn’t understand what He was saying. No, they were just as clueless as the folks who Isaiah said were trying to read a sealed book, just as ignorant as illiterates trying to read anything at all.

For just as Isaiah said, the scribes and Pharisees were claiming to worship God, even while they were substituting their own traditions, their own ideas for His Word. But did God say the wisdom of their own wise men was the answer? Did God tell them to do anything at all that would open their own blind eyes, or open their own deaf ears? No. What did God say? “Therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work among this people, a marvelous work and a wonder.” In other words, God Himself would solve the problem of His people’s cluelessness and hypocrisy.

And in the rest of Matthew chapter 15 Jesus will go on to act out the wonderful works that Isaiah prophesied – and in much the same order. In Isaiah 29:17, God says that Lebanon will be turned into a fruitful field – and where does Jesus go immediately after His encounter with the scribes and Pharisees? To the region of Tyre and Sidon, another name for Lebanon. In Isaiah 29:19, God says that the humble and poor shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. And what does Jesus do at the end of Matthew 15? He feeds four thousand people who have nothing to eat.

No, legalism isn’t the answer. Setting up our own moral codes while ignoring God’s Word is like a lump of clay telling its potter what to do. At the end of the day, the only thing legalism can produce is hypocrisy, as it tries to hide the truth of our sin not only from other people, but from God Himself.

How much better it is to look to Jesus. For He Himself is the answer, not only to empty stomachs and blind eyes and deaf ears, but to hardened and sinful hearts. Jesus is the Holy One of Israel Who has the power to make all of us holy as well, cleansing us from the inside out with His precious blood, giving us the power to live lives of integrity and obedience. Shouldn’t we trust Him to do just that?