

## The Dangers of Legalism

Mark 7:1-23

How could those scribes and Pharisees be so clueless? They were so concerned about the legalistic minutiae of religion, so busy sweating every single one of the details of the ceremonial law that they missed the main point. Jesus the Messiah, the One to whom all of those ceremonies and sacrifices pointed, was standing right in front of them, and they didn't even recognize Him.

And it's no wonder that Jesus called them a bunch of hypocrites, for this sort of effort to achieve perfection by following any sort of religious rules always falls short. After all, does anyone ever fully live up to his own standards, whatever they may be? No, the sad truth is that 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 nevertheless try to feel good about themselves by making up a set of rules and then trying to follow them.

For that is exactly what the ancient scribes and Pharisees were doing, wasn't it? Weren't they just making up rules, for example, rules about washing? Now, the Law of Moses had made it clear that the priests were to wash themselves in a particular way before they offered sacrifices in the Tabernacle. But the religious leaders of Jesus' time figured that if a little washing was good, more would be better. And if washing was right for the priests to do, then it ought to be right for everyone to do. So, they made up a lot of rules about washing, rules that Mark mentions in verses 3 and 4, and they taught everyone 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 commandments were quite common. And yes, some of them had a Biblical origin, but folks added on to them just as the Pharisees did. Jesus, for example, warned us about the danger of lustful glances, and so of course Christians should wear modest clothing. But the Victorians took this to such an extreme that it was considered scandalous for women to lift a skirt high enough to show an ankle. It was considered bad taste for a man to take off his jacket in public. A Biblical concern for modesty was thus transformed into a stultifying dress code, literally stifling at least during these summer months.

We see this mania for rule making perhaps most clearly today in the fashion of speech called political correctness. Of course it's right 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 ever quite knows what to say. And the rules keep changing at a dizzying pace. For example, you can't talk about "all of God's children, black men and white men" as Dr. Martin Luther King did in the rousing conclusion to his famous "I Have a Dream" speech – today you have to say "African Americans" not "blacks," and you certainly can't speak of all people as "men." And believe it or not, some classroom teachers have been told not to divide their students into boys and girls because that assumes there are only two genders – and yes, some folks would call into question even such an obvious biological reality.

But if legalism often adds on to God's commandments, transforming them into onerous burdens, in the process it often reverses the clear intention of these commandments. Look at Jesus'

comments in verses 9-13 – the scribes and Pharisees had cleverly constructed a way for adult children to avoid caring for their aged parents. After all, they reasoned, the Law of Moses says that anything promised to God must be given to Him, right? So, they reasoned, if an adult child said that some or all of his possessions were “Corban,” meaning devoted to the service of God, well, then those gifts had to go to the temple, and could not be used to care for their parents. 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 cut 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 rationalization, any tradition ever trump what God’s Word clearly says?

But unfortunately, it continues to be all too easy for us to rationalize away even the clearest of God’s commandments. And no, this isn’t just limited to those who are trying to justify abortion or to redefine marriage – evangelical Christians also have a tendency to trust in our reason instead of the Word of God. After all, we’ve cast off all those Victorian dress codes as too stultifying, too stifling. But in our freedom have we gone too far? In our embrace of what is currently fashionable have we also cast off Jesus’ warning about the dangers of lustful looks? Perhaps more seriously, have we embraced the equally popular Romantic idea of marriage as primarily for the pursuit of happiness and fulfillment? If so, have we gone along with the culture in discarding the idea of lifelong marriage as simply impractical – if you aren’t in love any more, why go on pretending, right? And have we thus forgotten what Jesus said – the two shall become one flesh, and what God has joined together, let not man put asunder?

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 to no effect? Are we really any better than those scribes and Pharisees?

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 essential point of God’s Law – the need for personal repentance.

For think about it – legalists tend to define righteousness in terms of a lot 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 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 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 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 what they mean. We’ve already seen that the Victorians placed a great deal of 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.” We oh-so-orthodox Presbyterians are often tempted 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 that they forgot the main point. The whole purpose of the food laws was to encourage God’s people to pursue spiritual holiness and purity. Refusing to put inside themselves things 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 on the outside, but on 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, it 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 blasphemy, pride, and foolishness 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 Jesus requires of us? Ironically, in quoting from Isaiah 29, which we read responsively this morning, Jesus points the way, even though the scribes and Pharisees, the so-called experts in God’s Word didn’t understand what He was saying. 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.

Just as Isaiah said, the scribes and Pharisees were claiming to worship God, all the 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 Mark chapter 7 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 29:18, God says that the deaf shall hear the words of the book, and after Jesus returns from Lebanon, the first thing He does is to restore the hearing of a deaf man. In Isaiah 29:19, God says that the humble and poor shall rejoice in the Holy

One of Israel. And what does Jesus do in Mark chapter 8? 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 clay telling the potter what to do. At the end of the day, all legalism can do is produce hypocrisy, trying 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?