

Mark 7:1-8 The Heart of Legalism

Have you ever wondered what would things look like if Satan actually took over a city? Consider two options:

The first may be where we have mayhem on a massive scale: Widespread violence, racial hostilities, sexualities that defy creation and pro-creation, pornography at your fingertips, a culture of death, churches closed down and worshipers dragged off to City Hall.

CONSIDER OPTION #2: Over a half-century ago, Donald Grey Barnhouse, pastor of Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church, gave a picture of what it would look like if Satan took control of a town in America. He said that **all of the bars and pool halls would be closed, pornography banished, pristine streets and sidewalks would be occupied by tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The kids would answer "Yes, sir," "No, ma'am," and the churches would be full on Sunday where Christ is not preached**

God called Israel to be a light to the nations. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We have already seen how the teaching and practice of Jesus put him at odds with the religious leaders, the Scribes and Pharisees.

In today's passage we get a deeper look at the root of the problem – a form of idolatry manifested by religious legalism.

1 The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, 2 and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; 4 and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) 5 The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" 6 And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written:

'This people honors Me with their lips,

But their heart is far away from Me.

7 But in vain do they worship Me,

Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'

8 Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men."

The CONTEXT

A religious posse has come from Jerusalem to check out Jesus. They were highly motivated to make this 90 mile trip from Jerusalem to Capernaum.

That may not seem like a long trip to us, but in those days it was not easy.

Obviously, word had reached the Jewish HQ that things were a bit irregular in the north. Reports about healings, preaching, casting out demons, etc got noticed and now it was time to check them out in person.

They gather around him and try to make a case against Jesus by bringing a concern about 'some of his disciples.'

What was the concern? They were eating bread with impure hands!! Scandal. Case closed. Jesus is a threat to their way of life because 'SOME' disciples aren't washing up before they eat.

IF they were running a restaurant and not washing after using the restroom, I get it. But that was not the case.

v. 5 THE CORE ISSUE

They are not following the 'tradition of the elders' . (Cue TEVIA – T-R-A-D-I-T-I-O-N) 🎵

** sideroad – In defense of Tradition – I LIKE TRADITIONS; they can be a glue that holds families and societies together. I'd bet that many of you have valued family traditions, even if they are not actually acknowledged. But you know when they are violated, and if you're honest, it probably rubs you the wrong way.

IN DEFENSE OF JEWISH TRADITION – It was their TRADITION derived from the Torah that helped keep the Jewish people together over centuries of hardship and persecution.

It is important to define WHAT LEGALISM IS NOT...

Advocating for Biblical morals is NOT Legalism or Moralism. If so, then Paul would be the chief legalist, yet we see that he is the apostle of the heart set free by Christ. He is set free from the chains of legalism, from the burden of trying to achieve a standing before God based on a righteous resume.

v. 5-6 THE ALLEGED VIOLATION

they ignored the ritual washing of food and broke the tradition of the elders. They were teaching that everyone had to wash in certain ways at certain times in order to be ritually pure. But those were manmade laws, NOT THE LAW OF God GIVEN TO Moses.

EX: "We've always done it this way or we've never done it that way"

v. 7-8 THE PROBLEM WITH TRADITION

it had led to vain worship in which God and His Law were replaced by the precepts of men. It was a religion with no heart, just external ritual and observance.

That gets to the core of sin because the great commandment is to LOVE THE LORD WITH ALL YOUR HEART...

A FORM OF religion that has no heart love for God is violating the great commandment, i.e. is SIN.

This text may seem odd and not relevant, but it is very relevant to our world today. Why?

Because we live in a world where people in power are trying to impose regulations, laws and standards on our lives all the time- What kind of stove can you cook with, gasoline to use, car to drive, what can or can't be said in public, what can or can't be thought in public or private, what medicines you must take, what terms or phrases you can or can't use etc, etc, etc.

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God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship.

Since the Christian life is a life of faith, the 'matters of faith' represent a broad category in our lives.

EX: in the history of the church many have died for the principles of faith, i.e. those who refused to say, 'Caesar is Lord". Sadly, Protestants and Catholics have persecuted each other over points of faith and worship.

EX: Jack Philips, the Colorado baker, has been sued several times because he held to his beliefs of religious conviction and refused to promote a worldview that violated biblical standards. The state was trying to force him to compromise his convictions.

If we don't affirm that God ALONE is lord of the conscience, then some group, secular or religious, will move in to set the rules. In our day, typically the state will move in. In the days of Jesus, it was the religious establishment- the Pharisees.

Secular or religious LEGALISM is a form of idolatry. It is one of two Gospel Thieves...

The "two thieves~ of the gospel. Tertullian said, "Just as Christ was crucified between two thieves, so this doctrine of justification is ever crucified between two opposite errors." These errors continue to "steal" the gospel from us. The theological terms for these two thieves are religion and irreligion~ or legalism and artinomianism. More colloquial terms could be moralism and relativism. Another set of terms (sure to offend some people) would be conservative and liberal.

On the one hand, "moralism/religion" stresses truth without grace, for it says that we must obey the truth in order to be saved. On the other hand, "relativists irreligion" stresses grace without truth, for they say that we are all accepted by God, and we have to decide what is true for us.

But "truth" without grace is not really truth, and "grace" without truth is not really grace. Jesus was "full of grace *and* truth". Any religion or philosophy of life that de-emphasizes or loses one or the other of these truths, falls into legalism or into license and either way, the joy and power and "release" of the gospel is stolen by one thief or the other.

The Biblical Gospel - how it gives us joy and power ("gospel" means "good news")

- God is a gracious Creator, and a holy and just God who will not tolerate sin.
- Man is unique and special because he is made in God's image as male or female, but we all have a terrible sin problem, and we need Gospel change.

The gospel teaches us that we are proud sinners who cannot live up to God's standards of holiness, but that Jesus, who never sinned, lived a perfect life and paid the penalty for our sins. The gospel teaches us to admit our sin and place our faith in Jesus.

This view preserves the justice and love of God. God is so holy that someone had to die. He is so loving that Jesus was glad to die. Thus, God Himself provides the transforming power and joy of salvation.

The gospel teaches and shows us that we are more sinful than we dare admit, but that through faith in Jesus we can be more loved, forgiven, and accepted than we dare imagine.

Back to Mark 7 THE PROBLEM IS HYPOCRISY

Jesus was not teaching something new. He draws on the prophet Isaiah ch 29 which predicted this. Mark 7:6-7

The problem with hypocrisy is that the hypocrite is not usually aware of his/her hypocrisy. The Pharisees were not playing at religious observance. They were actively pursuing piety in the best sense of the word, but their pursuit was out of line, and Jesus exposed that it was not from the heart.

THIS IS A WARNING FOR ALL OF US.

A MISCONCEPTION held by soooo many people inside and outside the church is that Biblical religion, especially the OT is dry obedience to a bunch of rules and rituals.

NO, NO, NO. The OT is based on a relationship of love not rules, trust not trying.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength" is OT

Ps 23 IS OT

Ps 119 , which talks about following God from the heart is OT.

The entire biblical narrative is about a relationship with God and like any good relationship it is built on love and trust. Worship from the heart will express itself in some way, and God's Law / good instruction set the framework for what that expression should look like.

By the time we get to Jesus we see the Jewish excess of the Pharisees. Over the centuries they had piled on law upon law and tradition upon tradition.

Jesus is not trying to undermine the law of God given to Moses. He is opposing those who have added to the law. It is the Pharisees who have undermined the Law by adding to it. By adding a bunch of manmade laws, the true heart orientation of the law of God is hidden.

Adding to the Law of God dilutes the law of God.

Man made righteousness obscures God's way of righteousness by faith – the just shall live by faith. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. – Gen 15

In Phil 3 Paul discusses his Pharisee past as one of putting confidence in the flesh rather than finding glory in Christ.

“Honor God with lips, but hearts are far from him.” Jesus points out their Hypocrisy

What do most non-Christians accuse Christians of??? Hypocrisy

** EX: why a Christian should not marry a non-Christian — because it confirms the charge of hypocrisy. You are doing the very thing that they don't like about Christians. Something has to give and sadly it is usually the Christian who gives up his/her faith. **

While it is easy to pile on the Pharisees, we must be careful, for in doing so we draw a line between them and us. We think and act as if they are so different from us. When we put them in a category by themselves, we lose an important truth ...

i.e. **The Pharisee heart lives in all of us.**

As Jack Miller is noted to say, “I'm a recovering Pharisee and am addicted to my own righteousness.”

I remember around 1992 as we were back in the States on furlough, and I was doing a study of passages on the Pharisees and was feeling very judgmental about them. And God opened my heart to recognize myself in the Pharisees.

What became clear to me is that we live with a serious degree of spiritual blindness until we see that “the Pharisee is me.”

There's a great big “I” in the middle of PharIsee, and the “I” in the middle is ME.

I think I'm safe in saying that we're all prone to some form of hypocrisy, to putting on a show of external behaviors while our hearts might be far from God. This passage is a call for us to examine ourselves regarding our own hearts and motives.

HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE LEGALISTIC HYPOCRISY?

- **Angry with God when things don't go our way**
- **We're irritated when our efforts aren't recognized to an appropriate degree – “Nobody thanks me.”**
- **Angry with others when they don't follow our forms of observance – making secondary disputable matters primary in relationships.**
- **We're often defensive when criticized and we're quick to offer constructive critiques to others.**
- **We act like we're experts in everything and are looking for the mistakes of others.**
- **We don't practice what we preach**
- **We see the rules as being more important than a relationship with God.**

It is all too easy for us to say or think...

“O God, I thank you that I'm not like those religious legalistic Pharisees over there.”

Rather ironic, don't you think?

Legalism is the default mode of the human heart– We are all selective legalists.

If we think we're doing enough it is easy to forget our need for Jesus. We do well to remember Ps 115

Not to us O Lord, not to us, but to Your Name give glory because of your lovingkindness, because of your truth.

Discussion Questions

Have you ever wondered what would things look like if Satan actually took over a city?

How do you distinguish legalism from simple Biblical practice?

Can you think of some examples???

Why is “God ALONE is lord of the conscience” so important?

How are religion and irreligion thieves of the gospel?

How do you stop those thieves? (with the gospel)

Where do you find yourself drifting toward legalism?

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/erik-raymond/what-i-would-do-to-the-evangelical-church-if-i-were-satan/>

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