

The Deadly Lure of Legalism

Mark 7:1-23

Introduction: 1) Let me introduce you to a prospective church member. I am certain you will be thrilled to see him join our fellowship. He will attend every service we have including special events. He will go on mission trips with a passion to convert the heathen. He will tithe, sing in the choir, read his Bible daily and memorize Scripture. He will be happy to pray when we gather for corporate worship. He is thoroughly orthodox in his theology. He is an inerrantist, monotheist and believes in heaven and hell. He never gets drunk, is not addicted to porn, never uses profanity, is a family man, loves his country feverently, weeps on July 4th and also votes the right way. His reputation in the community is stellar, and people who know him admire him for all that he does. If any man ever earned the right to go to heaven it is this man. His religion is certainly something to admire.

2) I have just introduced you, sadly, to a man headed for hell. I have just introduced you to a 21st century Pharisee! That word, that person, in the 1st century, was not scorned as a legalist. No, he was looked up to as a model citizen and a person of piety and religion. Unfortunately like so many then, and now, they had, as Paul says, “a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.” (Rom 10:2). Amazingly we can have a passion for God and yet not know God. We can be deceived, captured and enslaved by the deadly lure of legalism. Tragically, those who have been raised in the church all their lives are the most susceptible to this deception. Our pride in our religious rituals, church practices and cultural traditions blind us to 1) our great sinfulness and 2) the great Savior who alone can rescue us from our sin.

3) In *Mere Christianity* C. S. Lewis writes,

There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any

people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. I have heard people admit that they are bad-tempered, or that they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink, or even that they are cowards. I do not think I have ever heard anyone who was not a Christian accuse himself of this vice. And at the same time I have very seldom met anyone, who was not a Christian, who showed the slightest mercy to it in others. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others.... The vice I am talking of is Pride or Self-Conceit.... Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind. (108-109).

And, the Scriptures contain harsh language to convey the Lord's disdain for pride. For instance:

The LORD preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride (Ps. 31:23).

When pride comes, then comes disgrace (Prov. 11:2).

The LORD tears down the house of the proud (Prov. 15:25).

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall (Prov. 16:18).

Before destruction a man's heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor (Prov. 18:12).

One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor (Prov. 29:23).

I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant (Isa. 13:11).

The horror you inspire has deceived you, and the pride of your heart, you who live in the clefts of the rock, who hold the height of the hill. Though you make your nest as high as the eagle's, I will bring you down from there, declares the LORD (Jer. 49:16).

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 14:11).

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6).

These verses are just a sampling of the numerous passages in the Scriptures that condemn pride. But why is God so opposed to pride? It is because human pride is in opposition to God. It thinks more of itself than it should. It thinks more of itself than God does!

And amazingly, such pride may be lurking in unsuspecting locations like religion and legalistic bondage to the traditions of men.

Transition: What, then, does the deadly lure of legalism look like?

I. Legalist honor God with their lips resulting in false worship. 7:1-8

- Pharisees and scribes, teachers of the Torah (Law), come again (cf. 3:22) from Jerusalem amidst the growing popularity of Jesus (v. 1). By now we know they are up to no good when it comes to the Galilean prophet from Nazareth. They are certain they know who He is, and they are determined to take him down.
- Too often we have our minds made up in advance as to the character of a person. With our opinions firmly formed, we look only for evidence that will confirm our judgments and settle the case as far as we are concerned. Facts will not get in the way of our opinions.
- And, if we cannot find a fault that will stick to them, then we will go after their friends, associates and followers. “Guilt by association” is always a good tactic in taking someone down. This is the strategy they pursue (v. 2, 5).
- Religious legalists and Pharisees are expert at this game. Too often we play the game as well.

1) They love to compare themselves to others. 7:1-5

- The religious and spiritual elites surround Jesus looking for anything to accuse him of. His disciples provide the perfect opportunity: they ate with “defiled” (6X), that is

ceremonially, unwashed hands. For you “hand sanitizing freaks” this had nothing to do with hygiene. It was all about ritual purity and religious traditions that went beyond scriptural command but established spiritual superiority, their spiritual superiority, in the minds of the Pharisees and scribes. Writing to a Gentile, Roman audience, Mark provides something of a parenthetical explanation in vs. 3-4 (read).

- You might have touched something unclean so you must wash.
 - You might have touched a Gentile person so you must wash.
 - Cups must be washed; pots must be washed, and so on (v. 4).
 - Disregard the “traditions of the elders” (v. 3), and your sin.
- Religious ritual and legalistic traditions had taken over their lives enslaving them rather than freeing them. However, they were blind to their own self-imposed bondage and challenge Jesus with an air of spiritual superiority and self-righteousness (v. 5 read). Note: even they cannot cite a scriptural justification for their practice. That, however, does not matter. We are in the “religious right!” You and your disciples are not.
 - Now, do keep this in mind. All this religious washing had a good intent: to remind Jews that they were unclean before God. That was a good thing. However, they were completely off base on the true source of their impurity. Their problem was not outside but inside. It wasn’t their hands but their hearts.
 - It is pretty hard to compare hearts, something only God can see. So let’s draw up a religious list of external activities and see who comes out on top. That is much easier.

- Interestingly Exodus 30:19 informs us that the priest had to wash their hands and feet before they entered the tabernacle. The Pharisees, even out did the priest! No comparison: we are the religious champions!

2) They actually play the hypocrite with a distant heart. 7:6-8

- One thing Jesus consistently did was call out hypocrites and exposes them for who they truly are. In verses 6-8 Jesus makes no reference to the conduct of His disciples. He ignores that all together. He doesn't even get into a debate about washings. Instead, He exposes the true source of spiritual authority: is it "man made traditions" or is it the "Word of God?" What will determine how you think and live your life?
- Jesus begins with a scathing indictment calling out the Pharisees and scribes as "hypocrites," mask-araters! This is the only use of this word in all of Mark. They were nothing more than religious actors and pretenders. They were not real!
- Further, the prophet Isaiah (29:13) also condemns their hypocritical religion: in essence they honor God with their lips but their heart is nowhere near to be found. It is all words and show (v. 6).
- The result: vain, purposeless worship; worship God does not welcome or receive. The evidence: 1) they teach as doctrines the commandments of men (v. 7); 2) they leave or abandon the commandment of God and hold to the traditions of man (v. 8).
- For them the ultimate authority for spiritual life was Scripture and tradition, but if there was a conflict tradition won out and it did so every time. If the Bible is acknowledged at all it is only in passing. Sometimes it isn't even considered. We have our traditions. That is all we need.

- Example: church business meetings; deacons meetings; church discipline; religious practices (name of the church, times we meet, suit or no suit, choir or no choir, public invitation or no invitation and the list goes on!) Lists are so easy to check off!
Examining our heart isn't!
- Can you provide a scriptural basis for what you believe and do? Are you a text-driven or tradition-driven Christian? The difference is crucial.

II. Legalist make void the word of God resulting in spiritual disobedience. 7:9-13

- Not all traditions are bad. However, they do become bad when we put them on the same level as/or in the place of Scripture.
- It is possible to take a good thing, turn it into a God thing, thereby making it a bad thing. It is a “Bible plus” kind of religion. Adding to the Bible, you in practice make void the Bible and nullify its truth and power in your life (v. 13).
- Jesus makes this crystal clear as He moves into round 2 with the Pharisees. It is no contest. The “beat down” is ugly! The exposure of sinful hearts painful.

1) They reject the commandments of God and establish their own. 7:9

- The great scholar A.T. Robertson noted “the strong contrast here between the commandment of God and the traditions of men” (*Word Pictures*, 322).
- They think that they are establishing the commandment of God, protecting it. However, in actuality they are rejecting God's commandments and in the process establish their traditions as if they were God's commandments.
- They set aside what is the revealed Word of God and replace it with “made up” traditions of men. How ludicrous! How insane! How human.

- Man made rules and regulations became the object of obedience while God's commandments get set aside, left behind, "kicked to the curb."
- We don't need the Bible, the constitution and bylaws have the final word in this church. I have seen it. I have heard it with my own ears. I like the wisdom of Warren Wiersbe, "we must constantly beware lest tradition take the place of truth. It does us good to examine our church traditions in the light of God's Word and to be courageous enough to make changes" (p. 71).
- How often we foolishly push away the only reliable, trustworthy and infallible source of authority we have. It is an act of pure spiritual suicide. Have you seen the sad progression unfolding before our eyes: 1) teach the commandments of men (v.7); 2) leave the commandments of God (v.8); 3) reject the commandments of God (v.9); 4) make void the Word of God (v.13). And the tragedy of it all, we fail to see our hypocrisy in it. Oh, we know it is possible to be a hypocrite. We see it so clearly in others. It is when it is in us that we go spiritually deaf, dumb and blind.

2) They manipulate God's Word to their own advantage. 7:10-13

- Jesus now gives His own example that settles the issue. The verdict will not please the religious elites.
- He goes to the Scriptures and the writings of Moses (v. 10) pointing out what they clearly teach about how children are to treat their parents.
 - Exodus 20:12; Deut 5:16 (5th commandment); "Honor your father and mother."
 - Exodus 21:17; Lev. 20:9: "Whoever reviles (*NIV*; *NKJV*, "curses") father or mother must surely die."

The principle is clear: God calls children to honor and respect their parents.

- However, the Pharisees created a theological loophole that allowed them to circumvent, to get around, the clear command of God (vs. 11-12). They simply declared what they would have given to their parents “Corban” actually a Hebrew term referring to “a gift dedicated to God” (v. 11).
- Such a declaration, such a vow (Num 30:2), had to be honored and it allowed them to dis their parents, neglect their needs, and feel good about it because it was done, after all, in service to God. I serve God by disobeying his expressed command to honor my parents? What kind of logic is that?!
- Jesus tells them (v. 13) it is the kind of reasoning that 1) makes void the word of God, 2) sets up man-made traditions over God’s commands and 3) opens the door for many more such actions that reveals the hardness of our hearts, the hypocrisy of our worship, and the disobedience of our actions, all in the name of religion! These are not atheist and secularist. These are the religious and supposedly spiritual.
- Bottomline: they have placed their traditions in the place of Scripture and themselves in the place of God! The heart truly is an idol factory, and religious traditions are some of its best tools. This truth should concern us all. I may be as guilty as the Pharisees of Jesus’ day and not even see it.

III. Legalists are confused concerning the source of defilement resulting in a lack of true understanding. **7:14-23**

- The fruit of sin has its root in every human heart!
- Every human heart has the root of every human sin in it!
- You see, it is entirely possible to look nice on the outside while being dead on the inside.

- The most deadly contamination is not what I touch.

The most deadly contamination is what I think!

Proverbs 23:7: “As a man thinks in his heart so is he!”

1) Defilement has its root on the inside. 7:14-20

- Jesus summons all who are listening in on the theological debate and charges them (v. 14): “hear me” (imp), “all of you, and understand” (imp).
- He then delivers a little parable in v. 15 with an explanation in response to a question as to its meaning by his disciples (v. 17). Once again (cf. 6:52; 8:17-18) they are chided for their lack of understanding (v. 18). Also note, only the 12 are with him at this point (v. 17).
- What follows (vs. 18-20) is one of the most critically important spiritual lessons in all of the Word of God. We must not miss it.
 - Defilement (impurity) is not external but internal (v. 15, 18).
 - Defilement is not gastro-intestinal but cardiac (v. 19).
 - Defilement is not a matter of the stomach, it is a matter of the heart.
 - Defilement is not what goes in but what comes out (v. 20).
- Jesus’ words are spiritually revolutionary! Religiously they are shocking. The real issues of religious and spiritual faith are internal not external. The focus is on the inside not the outside. Sin always proceeds, has its genesis from within. Food ends up in the stomach, but sin begins in the heart. Food is eaten, digested in the stomach and expelled (v. 19; lit. “Goes out into the drain or latrine”). Sin, however, remains in the heart, and then produces all manner of defilement and death.
- Basic problem: not what we do but who we are!

- Real filth, impurity, defilement is inside and unseen, but it is there, and eventually it will show itself as vs. 21-23 make clear.
- By the way, note Mark’s editorial comment in v. 19: “Thus he declared all foods clean.” I believe the study note in the *ESV Study Bible* captures succinctly what Mark the evangelist is saying,

Mark notes that Jesus’ teaching, in essence, **declared all foods clean**. The Mosaic ceremonial laws distinguished between “clean” and “unclean” foods (see Lev. 11:1-47). Their purpose was to instill an awareness of God’s holiness and of the reality of sin as a barrier to fellowship with God. But once defilement of the heart is thoroughly removed and full fellowship with God becomes a reality (through the atoning death of Jesus; see Mark 10:45; Rom. 14:14; Heb. 8:6-13; 9:10, 14), the ceremonial laws have fulfilled their purpose and are no longer required.

The point is quite simple: it was always about the heart.

2) Defilement reveals its fruit on the outside. 7:21-23

- My friend Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. calls vs. 21-23 “the fingers of sin.”
- Sadly, but inevitably, sin’s root will produce sin’s fruit. And, it is an ugly , destructive crop to behold.
- Jesus provides a selective, not exhaustive, list of sin’s fruit. He highlights no less than 13 characteristics of the evil actions that flow naturally from a sinful heart, actions that always result in sorrow, destructive behavior and death. The list has a strong Old Testament grounding.

1) **Evil thoughts** – evil devising and schemes. They set the stage for what follows.

- 2) **Sexual immorality** – (*porneia*). General word identifying any and all sexual sins contrary to God’s will. It includes pre-marital, extra-marital and unnatural sexual behavior.
- 3) **Theft** – stealing. Taking from another what is not yours. The 8th commandment (Ex. 20:15; Deut. 5:19).
- 4) **Murder** – taking an innocent life in disobedience to the 6th commandment (Ex. 20:13; Deut 5:17).
- 5) **Adultery** – violating the marriage covenant by engaging in sexual behavior mentally (Matt 5:28) or physically with someone you are not married to. The 7th commandment (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18).
- 6) **Coveting** – greed, a desire for more at the expense or exploitation of another . A violation of the 10th commandment (Ex. 20:17; Deut 5:21).
- 7) **Wickedness** – behavior that is bad, evil; deliberate malice.
- 8) **Deceit** – deception, dishonesty, cunning treachery.
- 9) **Sensuality** – unbridled, shameless living that is completely lacking in moral discernment or restraint.
- 10) **Envy** – lit. “An evil eye,” figure of speech for stinginess, jealousy, rooted in unbelief. It believes God is withholding His best from you. A heart ailment that has the seeds of its own destruction sown within. It is never satisfied! It always wants more.
- 11) **Slander** – blasphemy; defaming; speaking evil of man or God.
- 12) **Pride** – arrogance, haughtiness.
- 13) **Foolishness** – senseless; spiritually insensitive.

Vs. 23 simply concludes: “All these evil things come from within, and they defile (5 times in vs. 15-23) a person.”

Conclusion: 1) There are basically only 2 approaches to religion, each of which can be summed up in a single word: do or done. The world says the problem is out there and the answer is what I can do. The Bible says the problem is in here and the answer is what Christ has done!

2) You see in legalism we think better of ourselves than Jesus does. But in salvation, we think of ourselves as Jesus does: hopeless, helpless sinners in desperate need of a Savior.

3) 1 Samuel 16:7 says, “For the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” When the Lord examines your heart, what does He see? A self-righteous legalist trusting in what I do, or a humble sinner trusting only in what Jesus has done. The difference is of eternal significance.