

Legalism Versus Love

Mark 7:1-13

Jesus has dealt with accusations from the scribes and Pharisees about forgiveness and blasphemy, eating and healing on the Sabbath (2:6-7; 2:24; 3:1-6), but never has he responded like this. The good shepherd is all about feeding the hungry, teaching the ignorant, loving the outcast, and being patient with his culpably dense disciples, but he is also willing to rebuke the wolves. He doesn't just disagree; he exposes the sin of legalism, of leaving the commandments of God for the traditions of men. But in doing so Jesus reveals the goodness of the God's law as a freeing and fulfilling opportunity to love.

The Agenda of Legalism

We need to remember that at their best the Pharisees were a movement to bless, reform and revive Israel. They were the first century equivalent of the Puritans who wanted to purify the people the God beyond the initial Reformation. But how they went about it was problematic. Coming from Jerusalem, about 90 miles to the region of Capernaum, they diligently sought Jesus and confronted him when they saw some of his disciples eat with unwashed ("defiled") hands (vv1-2, 5). Mark explains that the Pharisees and Jews didn't eat unless they washed their hands, bathed when they come back from the market, and kept a pile of other rules about washing stuff (vv3-4). The law of Moses required priests to wash before entering the tabernacle, and for people in their households to be clean in order to partake of the sacrifices (Ex. 30:19-21; Num. 18:8-13). The Pharisees extended these laws, as well as inventing others, to all foods and all people in the land. If people aren't keeping the rules, they thought, *let's make more*. This is the bureaucratic heart at work. God's law is a wonderful fence, but you don't put a fence around your fence unless you have serious issues. The Pharisees wanted to be holy in everything (Lev. 19:2), to combat pagan culture (cf. Lev. 20:1-7), and meet God in the details of life, but they wanted it under their control.

The Result of Legalism

Jesus throws down their fence saying Isaiah prophesied about them well (vv6-7; Is. 29:13). To honor with the lips but not the heart is hypocrisy, a division between word and heart. You can't love God *as God* and want to amend his character-revealing law. This distanced heart resulted in empty worship. If the service stinks, it's a problem with the heart. In this case more isn't merrier, and it's not possible to have both God's commands and traditionalism together (v8). God forbids adding to his law because to add to it is to take away from it, like a little Kool-Aid in the cabernet. Bad money drives out good, and legalism chases out true righteousness (v9). Moses said to honor your father and mother, and to revile them was a capital crime in Israel (v10; Ex. 20:12, 21:17). The scribes and Pharisees had rules where people could give to the temple what they would have used to serve their parents, call it *Corban*, and still feel good about it (vv11-13). Legalism is all about feeling good on the cheap and easy, whether by abstention (e.g. alcohol) or activity (e.g. prayer, Corban).

The Antidote of Love

Notice throughout this passage Jesus always sets legalism against the real law of God (vv7-8, 10, 12). He didn't come to set aside the law (Matt. 5:17), and would have sung Psalm 119, all about loving God's law. How do we love Jesus? "If you love me, keep my commandments" (Jn. 14:15). James calls God's law the "the law of liberty" (1:25), and Paul says "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10). Don't think of the law as negative, difficult or even primarily prohibitive. Jesus illustrates the positive aspect of the law even as he convicts the scribes and Pharisees. "Honor your father and mother" is a command to do stuff for our parents, to love them. To look at God's law is to set off a cycle of grace. We see our sin, Jesus Christ's perfection given to us, and the Spirit enabling us to love God, one another and live free. With the love of God, tradition never becomes traditionalism.

NOTES FOR LITTLE SAINTS

Today's Passage: Mark 7:5-13

5 And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 6 And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." 8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." 9 And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! 10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' 11 But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God) — 12 then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

1. The Pharisees and scribes don't like the way Jesus' disciples are acting. Why (verse 5)?
2. Jesus says they are hypocrites. Why, what did they do (verse 8)?
3. The Pharisees made up rules to make them and others feel holy. This is called legalism. We're not allowed to make up rules and enforce them on people. Does anyone you know do this? Write their names down, just kidding! If someone makes up an unkind rule and tries to force it on you, what should you do?
4. Jesus said the scribes and Pharisees made up rules so people could give to them instead of helping their parents. God's rules are always about love. They describe his character. How do you honor your parents? What could you do for them to show them how much you love them? List at least two and draw a picture of you doing something fun with your parents.

Memory Verse to Recite Next Week:

6 And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me"'". –Mark 7:6