

When Religion Isn't Righteous

Matthew 15:1-20

Mark Vroegop

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 2 "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." 3 He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' 5 But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, 6 he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. 7 You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

10 And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: 11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." 12 Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" 13 He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. 14 Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." 15 But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us." 16 And he said, "Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone" (Matt 15:1-20).

On June 4, 2010, CNN.com ran an article with an intriguing question: "Are there dangers in being 'spiritual but not religious'?" The article picture featured a man sitting cross-legged on a beach in a position of prayer with the following caption: "Being spiritual but not religious means you do not need a church or a community, some say. A beach will do." The article featured various points of view about this trend. Some view it is just another egotistical expression and others view it as a response to the abuses of organized religion. One of the more alarming statistics featured in the article is that a 2009 survey by LifeWay Christian Resources found that 72% millennials (18-29 year olds) embraced this spiritual-but-not-religious category. In fact it is so common that it has own acronym – I'm SBNR and a dedicated Facebook page. I think it is safe to say that from a cultural standpoint being SBNR is becoming more and more normal and even accepted, almost hip.

Are there dangers with being spiritual but not religious? I certainly think so. But I believe there is something even more dangerous: RBNR. Religious but not righteous. In fact, I think that one of the reasons that many millennials may reject organized religion is because they sense a disconnect between the form and the reality of religion. They are tired of people who are religious but not righteous.

The Bible, particularly the gospels, frequently connects being religious without being righteous with two groups of people: the Scribes and the Pharisees. They were the highly esteemed teachers of the Law who were the most threatened and the most opposed to Jesus. In their love for the Law of Moses, they concocted various other laws to help people not break the Law of Moses. Over time their man-made laws became so important to them that they violated the very heart of the original commandments. They became religious but not they were not really righteous.

Legalism Defined

Another word for being religious and not righteous is legalism. Now this word gets thrown around a lot so we need to be sure what we mean by the term. In other sermon series¹, I have given you a two-fold definition:

- Treating certain standards as regulations which are kept by your own power in order to gain favor with God
- Creating certain codes of conduct that go beyond the teaching of the Bible and making conformity to these codes critical to being a “real Christian” or part of the group

The danger with the first definition is that we try in our own power to be moral, and the second definition is problematic because it is an attempt, in our own power, to make the church pure. Both are failures to trust God and his power. Both have self-worship at the root, and both are just as sinful as rampant licentiousness. The licentious man uses risky and sinful behavior to worship himself, and the legalist uses rules and regulations to worship himself.

Legalism is scary because of the level of self-deception. Let me explain. A licentious man knows that he is sinner; he feels guilty, but he just doesn't care to change. But a legalist doesn't think he needs to change. He doesn't think he is a sinner because he feels religious. The licentious man knows he's unrighteous. The legalist thinks unrighteousness is everyone else's problem.

As you can see, being religious but not righteous is not only dangerous; it is offensive. Our text today highlights a very important exchange between the legalistic rulers and Jesus, and it

¹ See “Don't Be Afraid of Shadows” (August 17, 2008) <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/dont-be-afraid-of-shadows/>, “Why Man-made Rules Won't Work (August 31, 2008) <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/why-man-made-rules-dont-work/>,

highlights the contrast between legalism and real righteousness. Let me give you some characteristics of each.

Four Characteristics of a Legalist

I am going to lift some very interesting characteristics from this text, and my prayer is that you will be able to recognize the warning signs of legalism in your own life and in the lives of others.

1. Aggressive action

Verse one begins with a simple statement that "Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem." At first this may seem like simply an opening sentence, but it is really quite informative. Do you remember where we left Jesus? He was in the city of Gennesaret which is a city on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. I figured out that it is over 100 miles from Jerusalem to Gennasaret. To give you a sense of the distance consider that it is just over 100 miles to travel from Carmel to Fort Wayne. And if you were to walk non-stop it would take you 35 hours to arrive. So this is a significant trip for these rulers to make.

Given the fact that Matthew says "Pharisees and scribes," it implies that this was a significant delegation. So it seems likely that these were high-ranking religious rulers who were highly motivated to ask Jesus a question. These religious rulers were aggressive enough to travel a long distance. I don't want to get a head of ourselves in our study but realize that they walked 100 miles to ask Jesus a "really" important question: "Why don't your disciples wash their hands before they eat?" Seriously!

Aggressive action is a typical part of legalism because action, control, and "doing stuff" is the main manifestation of their self-worship and do-it-myself mentality. This simply reflects the core problem of legalism: a reliance on self. Therefore legalists are usually very aggressive with themselves and others. They not only believe that there must be a certain way of doing things but their spiritual pride causes them to feel like they are self-appointed guardians of the truth and as if their mission in life is to help others "see the true way." They are busy, aggressive, opinionated, condescending, and always trying to make converts to their way of thinking.

Here's what Jesus said about them in another setting: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (Matt 23:15).

2. Sounding spiritual

The second characteristic is the fact that legalism sounds so spiritual. Part of its power is that it has just enough truth attached to it that at first it almost seems as if it is right. And that is because legalism has truth as a part of its DNA. Somewhere along the line someone added something to a biblical truth and began focusing on the addition. This is what happened during Jesus' time.

The religious rulers travel over 100 miles in order to ask Jesus a question. Here it is: "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat" (v 2).

The issue is one of ceremonial cleanness and righteous living. The religious rulers had taken laws that applied to priestly purity and applied it to all Jews (see also Mark 7:3-4).² I can only imagine how they got to this point. My guess is that they experienced the spiritual benefit of the obedience to these restrictions, and they believed that everyone should benefit for what they've experienced.

This is where we need to be careful. Often the seeds of legalism are laid in spiritual experiences that are then mandated – directly or indirectly – on other people. For example:

- You received Christ by walking aisle and you begin to think that every service should have an altar call
- God blessed your heart through a particular song or a type of music, and you think that real worship is found in those songs or style
- You've been blessed by using a particular method or content for studying the Bible, and you begin to talk in such a way that everyone has to study the Bible like this
- God showed up in a particular area of ministry and you think that everyone has to be involved if they are really going to serve the Lord

Do you feel the tension? I could go on for a long time about all the good things that became bad because the spiritual value of a form morphed into a mandate. And the problem is that at first it sounds spiritual.

3. Unbalanced focus

The underlying problem is that the focus shifts, and there is a lack of balance. That's what Jesus says in verses 3-6:

² David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2008), 379.

3 He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?
4 For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.'
5 But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God,
6 he need not honor his father.'

Don't miss what Jesus is saying here! The legalist creates additional commands in order to keep the law but in do so he actually breaks it. In this case the religious rulers had created a law (Corban) regarding money committed to the temple that allowed for a person to neglect the provision of their parents because they had dedicated money to the temple. Therefore, someone could claim that they were not able to meet the needs of family because the resources had been pledged to God.³ A child could tell their parents that they are unable to take care of them because the money is dedicated to a spiritual building. Ironically the person who pledged the money could access the money without penalty. The problem with legalism is that it sounds spiritual, but it is unbalanced.

Legalism forgets what is really important. It loses its spiritual moorings. So while the legalist might more spiritual, disciplined, and knowledgeable; he or she is really not because the focus is not right. They end up creating the very thing they were trying to avoid - disobedience: "So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God" (Matt 15:6). This is what legalism always does has an unbalanced focus.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. 24 You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! (Matt 23:23-24).

4. Private dissonance

Finally, we come to another real problem when it comes to legalism; a problem that is lurking underneath the surface that only the legalist really knows: the heart is far from God. Privately there is spiritual dissonance, disconnection, or distance from the heart of God. At its core legalism is a covering for a subtle self-centered rebellion or spiritual pride.

Jesus cites the book of Isaiah, a highly revered book in the Jewish mind and heart:

"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 9 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt 15:8-9).

What an indictment to religious people! He says that what is coming out your lips is not what is really in your heart, and what you are teaching the people is not really the commandment of

³ Turner, 380.

God. Jesus is accusing them of a fundamental fakery that is outrageous. In their worship of God, they have actually driven him out.

This is always what happens with legalism, and it is so tragic. Religious activity which was supposed to be about God and his glory becomes about us. Rules are written in the name of protecting the people from sin when in fact the rules only create more sin. And the things that a person thought would draw him or her closer to God only served to create further distance as the person works harder and harder; but it is never enough. And the reason is because the real endgame in legalism is not God but self.

So these are the characteristics of legalism. Let me give you two cautions: First, if you are more prone to think of someone else as we went through this section rather than yourself, be warned. Secondly, be constantly on guard for the subtle seeds of legalism that creep into your heart. Pray that you will not be religious and not righteous.

Now let's turn our attention to the other side. How does Jesus describe real righteousness?

Three Characteristics of Real Righteousness

Gratefully Jesus pulled his disciples and the crowd aside and talked with them about what real righteousness is. And we learn some great things from him here. I want to highlight three characteristics of real righteousness. Of course there are more, but these are the basics.

1. Understanding that the real problem is internal not external

Jesus begins by first identifying what the real problem is. The Pharisees are hung up about hand-washing; they see ceremonial uncleanness as the problem. But Jesus redefines the issue by getting to the source of the problem.

He says, "Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person" (v 10-11).

Jesus is showing us where sin comes from. The religious rulers seem to think that sin is basically something that comes from an outside force or action. They are focused on what happens to a person or what a person does. Jesus shows the crowd that the problem is much bigger than that, and this is important because one's understanding of the problem informs the solution.

The real problem, says Jesus, is what comes out of a person. In other words, the religious rulers overestimated the importance of external issues because they have minimized the internal issues. Real righteousness begins by understanding that the real problem is not the outside. The real problem is the inside, the heart.

Again this is the real difference in Christianity from all other religions. Every other belief system or world view believes that externals are what God is really interested in. But Jesus tells us that we are the problem! And that is why the cross is central to our faith. Jesus had to pay our debt. Jesus had to change what we could not change on our own.

2. Living for God's approval not man's

The next thing that happens is Jesus' disciples tell him that he has offended the Pharisees (v 12), and Jesus responds to this by explaining to them that the religious rulers are "the blind leading the blind" and they are like plants that the Father is going to uproot.

Jesus could care less what the Pharisees think because he is not on the earth to please them. Real righteousness embraces the truth of Galatians 1:10 – "For am I seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ."

In August, I'm going to unpack this over four weeks with a series called "Approval Junkie." We are going to see how problematic the fear of man is in our lives and what it can produce. John tells us something very interesting:

42 Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God" (John 12:42-43).

One of the primary ways that legalism holds people in bondage is through the fear of what others think of you. Unwritten rules, judgmental looks, the pressure to fit in, and the focus on external issues imprison people because they live for the approval of others. Real righteousness is so different; its focus is not on what people think, but on what God thinks.

3. Focusing on the heart not just actions

Our passage ends with Peter asking for a full explanation of what Jesus has said. Jesus identifies that real righteousness is heart-focused, not just action-focused. Real righteousness is all about what is going on in the heart. Jesus said, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person." Real righteousness drives deeper than actions alone; it aims for the ultimate source: the heart.

Verse 19 tells us that evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander all come out of the heart. In other words, real righteousness focuses on where real righteousness comes from. It certainly include a focus on actions because actions are still

important, it starts from the heart. Legalism starts and ends with externals. Real righteousness focuses on the heart.

This focus determines everything. When you just focus on externals then you make a big deal out of things that shouldn't be (like ceremonial washings), and you neglect even bigger issues. Focusing on the heart starts in the right place.

Why does the legalist miss the heart? Because the real focus is on what I can do to; legalism is self-focused. The legalist misses the heart because he cannot change it! And here is where the gospel that Jesus offers brings such hope.

In the Old Testament (Ezekiel 11:19-21) God promised that one day he would change the heart of his people so that they could "walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them." And this is what the gospel does: Jesus makes you a new creation – the old is gone, the new has come. That is why Jesus described it to Nicodemus in John 3 as being born again.

Real righteousness focuses on the heart. And here's the thing. The more you grow in righteousness the more help you know that your heart really needs. Real righteousness means growing in understanding of how bad your heart really is, but you also know a Savior whose makes real righteousness possible because he changes your heart and gives you righteousness that could never come from you.

Religion will always be unrighteous without Jesus at the center.

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