

When You Can't Draw Near

Ignorance and Insight: Part 7
Mark 7:1-13 (Mt.15:1-9) 2/2/2019

Legalism is an insidious problem, because it allows your heart to drift far from God while making you think you're doing great spiritually. This message (and the following message on vv.14-23) explore exactly what it means for your heart to be near or far from God, what causes drift, and how to draw near.

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Mark 7:1 The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and 2 saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed. 3 (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial¹ washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 4 When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?” 6 He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is

¹ Literally, “The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands with a fist.” The meaning of that phrase is uncertain. Some take it to mean they wash *often, diligently*, thoroughly, or carefully. It could mean *up to the fist* or even “up to the elbow” or the rubbing of a closed fist in the palm of the other hand, or pouring water over a clinched fist, or the use of a handful of water.

written: “ ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ 8 You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” 9 And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! 10 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ 11 But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), 12 then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. 13 Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

Introduction

Hearts Far from God

Let me start by asking you the most important two questions you can ever ask yourself at any given moment. What is the proximity of your heart to God right now? Close? Or far? The second question is even more important. How did you come up with your answer to the first question? What kinds of evidences make you think you’re close or far from God? What measure do you use to gauge your closeness to God?

We’re picking up our study of the gospel of Mark and we come tonight to ch.7. The crux of the whole first half of this chapter is right there in v.6, where it says, **their hearts are far from me**. There are only two directions you can go in life. You can draw near to God or you can wander far from God, and everything you do in life matters only inasmuch as it accomplishes one of those two things. And everything you do in life does accomplish one of those two things. There is no staying still. You are always either drawing nearer or wandering farther.

And the farther you wander from God, the more worthless your life becomes. Look at v.7. ...**they worship me in vain**. Their worship—their efforts to honor God, were a total waste of time. The farther your heart moves from God the more worthless your worship becomes. And if your worship is worthless, your life is worthless. Anything that has no value to God has no value at all.

So there’s nothing worse than being far from God. For those of us who know God, distance between us and him is our greatest fear—whether it be because we moved away from him or because he withdrew from us. The psalmists would cry out, “**Do not be far from me, O Lord!**” (Psalm 35:22) Why? Because they knew that moving your heart far from God is like moving a plant away from sunlight. It dies.

Psalm 73:28 The nearness of God is my good.

Psalm 65:4 Blessed are those you choose and bring near ... We are filled with the good things of your house.

In Psalm 145:18-20 says when the LORD is near to you, he fulfils your desires, he hears your cry and saves you when you’re in trouble, and he watches over you.

So Jesus is giving these scribes and Pharisees the most horrific diagnosis possible. This is worse than your doctor saying, “I’m sorry, you have two weeks to live.” Jesus tells them, “Your hearts are far from God and your worship is a total waste of time.” That is astonishing because no one in Israel was more devoted to worshipping the true God and drawing near to him. Every moment of their day was devoted to that and no one went to greater extremes in that pursuit than they did. And that explains what would otherwise seem very strange in the first paragraph of mark 7. Let’s take it from the top—v.1.

The Pharisees’ Complaint

Mark 7:1 The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus

Jerusalem is the capital. This is like officials from Washington D.C. showing up at your door. Jesus has become a national crisis.

And these are not his friends. The last time they came, back in ch.3, they pronounced Jesus satanic. And the Pharisees were plotting to kill Jesus. So they roll up in their black SUV's and set up their surveillance on Jesus. And it doesn't take long for them to find a major infraction.

1 The Pharisees ... gathered around Jesus and 2 saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed.

That's what they pick up on? They didn't wash their hands? Do you remember what was happening at this time? Glance back a paragraph and you'll see—people were bringing their sick from miles around, and everyone who so much as brushed up against his cloak got up from their stretcher and walked away in perfect health. Go back another paragraph—Jesus walked on water, stilled a storm, and fed thousands with a few crackers. All that is happening and these inspector Clouseau's show up from D.C. and conduct their thorough investigation of this Jesus character, and this is their big finding? They didn't wash their hands? Are they germaphobes or what?

No. This had nothing to do with hygiene. I'm sure if the disciples had gunk on their hands they would wash before eating. This is talking about religious purification rituals. And it's somewhat understandable given the OT law.

In the OT, when God talked about who could approach him and who couldn't, he used the word “unclean” or “defiled” hundreds of times. Whenever you see the word “unclean” in the Bible, you could pencil in the word, “disgusting,” or “unacceptable.” That's what “unclean” means—disgusting to God, and therefore you're unacceptable and cannot approach God.

If you don't care about drawing near to God in worship, then cleanness or uncleanness won't matter to you. But people who cared a lot, like the Pharisees, took it seriously. They devoted their entire existence—every hour of every day, to making sure they were clean before God so they could have access to him in worship. So it's not quite as loony as it sounds when they bring up handwashing.

The Traditions

At least, it wouldn't be if it were in the Bible. But it wasn't. The Bible required a lot of cleansing rituals to symbolize cleanness before God, but this wasn't one of them. “So where did this rule come from?” Thankfully, Mark is writing to Gentiles who weren't familiar with Jewish customs, so he gives an explanation. And this is really going to get us into the crux of the issue.

3 (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial² washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 4 When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

This handwashing ritual came not from the Bible, but from what was known as the **tradition of the elders**. Over the centuries, the rabbis came up with a system they referred to as building a fence around the law.³ The idea is to come up with rules that are more strict than God's law, so you can be sure you won't break God's law. So if God said the speed limit is 55, they said, “We'll make it 40.” That way, even if you slip past the 40 limit, you'll still be well under 55. So they saw a law in God's Word that said priests should do a handwashing ritual, and they said, “We'll do you one better God. We'll have *everyone* wash

² Literally, “The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands with a fist.” The meaning of that phrase is uncertain. Some take it to mean they wash *often, diligently*, thoroughly, or carefully. It could mean *up to the fist* or even “up to the elbow” or the rubbing of a closed fist in the palm of the other hand, or pouring water over a clinched fist, or the use of a handful of water.

³ M. Avoth 3:14, cited by Edwards p.208.

their hands every time they eat and every time they come from a public place where some Gentile might have touched something.”

4 ... And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.

When he says **many other traditions**, that’s putting it mildly. The section in the Mishna on rules for the ritual washing of pots and pans is 30 chapters! And there is an entire volume on handwashing. The handwashing was a really big deal. One rabbi was excommunicated for neglecting it. Another rabbi was imprisoned by the Romans and was given a daily ration of water to drink, and he almost died because he used it for washing his hands. They actually had a prescribed prayer thanking God for commanding them about handwashing (“Blessed are you oh Lord, King of the universe, who has commanded us regarding handwashing...”) So this was not a small matter to them. If being accepted by God depended on being clean and undefiled in his sight, then what could be more important than the cleansing laws?

So they developed a massive religious system where every moment of life was an effort to avoid contamination so they could be near God. That was their whole existence. And in their eyes, if you ignore that system, there can only be one possible reason—you don’t care about approaching God in worship. God’s not going to accept your worship if you’re unclean.

5 So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”

Critical Spirit

By the way, this is what people do when their hearts are far from God but they think they are close to God. They criticize other people for being far from God. That’s one of the first symptoms of legalism—a critical, condemning attitude. Legalists are always pointing out how others are getting it wrong. Visit any church with a legalist and you’ll spend your whole lunch hour afterward hearing about everything that’s messed up about that church and the pastor.

One of the clearest pictures of a Pharisee is in Luke 18 where the Pharisee prayed, “I thank you that I’m not like other men ...” Legalists are critical because, deep down, they think they are better than the people they criticize. Think of how many people reject Christianity because they think we’re like that. Think of how ironic that is. Those people say, “Christians always look down their noses at you and who think they are better than you.” Oh, so you can’t stand people who think they are better than others? “That’s right!” And we, in the church, have that flaw? And you don’t, which means you’re better than us? You can’t be around people who think they are better because you think your better than them? They are doing the exact thing they claim to hate.

That attitude does exist in the church, but you can’t escape it by leaving the church. You can’t even escape it by going off by yourself. It’s in every human heart. And we’ll see why that is next time.

Wrong Part

Isaiah Was Right

So these geniuses decide to pick a religious debate with Jesus Christ. You’d be better off picking a slap fight with an MMA champ or something—it’s not a fight you’re going to win.

6 He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: “ ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 7 They worship me in vain.

Jesus says, “Hey, did you guys know you’re in the Bible? Yeah. In Isaiah 29 when God was condemning the wicked people of his time who were far from God—that passage describes you hypocrites.” The NIV says, “**Isaiah was right** ...” It’s the word *kalos*, which means good. So he’s saying, “Isaiah really did a good job describing your hypocrisy.”

Legalism

Hypocrisy was one of three complaints Jesus had against the Pharisees' religious system. Before we started tonight I told you legalism isn't a biblical term, so you can define it however you like. When I use the term in this message, what I mean by it is this: whatever Jesus didn't like about the Pharisees' religious system. On most points they were right on, but there were three areas where Jesus confronted them. All three come up in this passage, and the first one is right here—hypocrisy. That's one form of legalism.

Hypocrisy

Now, when you first read that you might think, "Wait a minute—what's hypocritical about their question? They faithfully kept the traditions, the disciples didn't, and so they asked about it. How is that hypocritical?"

Usually people think of a hypocrite as someone who pretends to be religious, but they aren't really serious about it. But that's not the case here. People who aren't serious about religion don't walk 90 miles to confront someone who is violating a tenant of their religion. No one lived out the message they preached more than the Pharisees. They preached about keeping the rules, and they were professionals at keeping all the rules.

Hypocrisy isn't about sincerity or being serious. Hypocrisy is about whether the outside matches the inside. This is the point where Jesus says, **6 These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.** Lips near; hearts far. Hands clean; hearts dirty. They had devoted their whole existence to being clean so they could draw near to God, but it didn't work. Why? Because they washed the wrong part of them. They washed their hands, but hands aren't the part of you that are close or far from God. The only part of your being that can be close to God or far from God is your heart.

They thought being close to God was an automatic byproduct of following all the external rules. With their hands they did the rituals, and with their lips they said all the right prayers and affirmed all the right doctrines. And yet their hearts were far from God.

The Heart

What does that mean, exactly—to have your heart far from God? If we want our hearts to be close to God we need to know this, right? So what is the heart? It's the invisible part of you—your emotions, your will, your thoughts. It's the part of you that loves and hates. And it's the part of you that decides the direction of your life. When you see things, your brain analyzes them, and then your heart accepts or rejects them; loves them or hates them, gets on board with them or resists them.

That's what your heart is. So what does it look like when that part of you—the part that loves, hates, accepts, rejects, chooses direction—what does it look like when that part of you is far from God? Your heart is far from God's heart when you love what he hates, or when you're apathetic about what God loves. When his will is for one thing, and your will is for something different. When your attitude about something is contrary to God's attitude. The things God wills and loves and chooses and values and regards as important, if your heart is moving in the direction of willing and wanting and loving and choosing and valuing and regarding things the same way, that means your heart is moving closer to God. You're becoming a man or woman after God's own heart.

John 7:17 If anyone wills to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God.

Insight comes when your will aligns with God's will. But any time you resist God's will and his desires in favor of your will and your desires, you are moving away from God regardless of your actions—even if you're having total victory over all your external besetting sins. And that was Jesus' assessment of these men. They were far from God.

You can just see Mark shaking his head as he writes this. The Son of God is standing right there and they are worried about cups, pitchers, and kettles. What greater, more tragic collapse has any culture ever undergone than this—to fall from the religion of the book of Psalms and Deuteronomy and Isaiah to the religion of washing cups, pitchers, and kettles. No wonder Jesus saw the people of his time as being like sheep without a shepherd.

A Common Problem

The more you focus on externals, the more your heart can drift without you even realizing it. And it's easy to see examples of other people doing this and shake our heads, but we do this. We all naturally drift toward a mechanized approach in our relationship with God—doing the actions of Christianity without paying attention to God. We look at actions so much more than the heart.

Just the other day I was at work and the thought popped into my head, “God is watching you right now. Is he pleased or grieved?” Well, at that particular moment I happened to be listening to a commentary in preparation for this message. So my first thought was, “I’m studying the Bible.” Do you see the problem with that? My first thought was about what I was *doing*. Doing. Why did I think of that first? Could I study the Bible with a bad motive? Yes. Could I study the Bible with my back to God? Yes. Could I study the Bible and be an atheist? Yes. So why was my first thought about what I was doing? If Jesus made such a big deal over the primacy of the heart, why wasn’t my first thought about what I was loving and hating and desiring and willing and seeking?

John Wesley was an amazing man. He would wake up every day at 4:00am to pray so that he would still have plenty of time during daylight hours for ministry. He preached the gospel, he travelled across the ocean by boat to be a missionary to reach the Indians in America. Then he got back and realized he wasn’t even saved. It’s so easy to lose sight of the fact that only your heart can be close or far from God.

Goal: Application

Now, that’s not to say our actions are irrelevant. Jesus is going to condemn the Pharisees in v.11 for their actions regarding money and their parents. So actions are hugely important. But only inasmuch as they reflect the heart.

And what happens is this—we read something in the Bible about our hearts, and we say, “Ok, I want to obey that. What can I do to put that into practice?” The Bible says, “Love your neighbor.” That’s not very specific. If I love my neighbor, what will that look like when I see panhandlers on the way to work? What if my child gets arrested on a DUI? Does love let him sit overnight in jail, or bail him out? We all have to answer questions like that, which can be difficult. The problem comes when we answer them, we come up with a practice that we think best reflects love, then we start focusing on that practice and forget about the actual heartfelt love!

You see how it starts good, but quickly goes bad? The Bible says an unmarried couple should remain morally pure. But exactly what does that look like in practical terms? Is kissing ok? If so, what kind of kissing? Sitting real close on the couch? Hand-holding? A side hug? Where do you draw the line?

Line Drawing

That’s a question I got a lot as a youth pastor. “How far is too far when it comes to physical affection?” Questions like that might begin as a desire to obey God, but the moment someone gives you an answer, it becomes a tool your deceitful heart will use to move away from God. As soon as the line is drawn, your heart says, “Ok, we get to go right up to that line, guilt free.” What does the couple desire? Impurity. What does God desire? Purity. But now that they have a line that supposedly keeps them safely close to God, they’re going to move as close to that line as possible, which means they are going to move as far from purity as they can without crossing the line. So which direction is their heart moving? Away

from God. Regardless of your actions, what happens when your heart moves away from God? You end up with a heart that is far from God, like these Pharisees.

The heart after God's own heart says, "Not my will but your will be done God." The heart that is far from God says, "My will be done! I will knuckle under to the letter of the law, but I'm not adopting your will. I'm hanging on to my own will." So their actions appear squeaky clean, but their hearts are moving away.

Good or Evil?

This is the same principle Jesus dealt with back in ch.3 over the Sabbath. Remember, the Pharisees were all ready for a big debate on exactly where the lines and rules and regulations regarding healing on the Sabbath? And Jesus hits them with this: "Which is lawful on the Sabbath, to do good or to do evil?" They were so focused on regulations they had lost sight of the basic question—good or evil. Which direction should we go, toward preserving life or toward murder?

You see, when your heart is moving in the direction of what is good, you don't have to worry about boundaries. When Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit in Gal.5:22 he ends by saying **Against such things there is no law.** If you're moving in the direction of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc., you don't have to worry about whether you're crossing a line or breaking a rule. The more the better. People ask, "How far is too far?" I've never once had a couple come to me and ask, "How much purity is too much?"

If you want to know why God hates legalism so much, just apply it to a human relationship. What would your wife think if you said, "Honey, I really want to make absolutely sure I don't break my wedding vows in any way, so just tell me—how far is too far for me and the secretary at work? If you would just write out a list of all the things I'm not allowed to do with her, that will help me a lot. I won't break any of them." What does all that say to her? It tells her your desires are for another woman and you just want to know the what the minimum restriction is on that desire without getting in trouble.

Wrong Mirror

Adding to Scripture

So Jesus confronts the most squeaky clean people in the country and says they are far from God. How on earth did that happen? How did the most zealous leaders of chosen people of God end up getting it that wrong, so that even after devoting every hour of their lives to drawing near to God, they ended up far from God? Jesus tells us exactly how that happened in the rest of v.7.

7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men. 8 You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

The thing that caused them to drift from God was human wisdom. They added human tradition to God's Word.⁴

Tradition is Always External

And whenever you add human tradition to the Word of God, the stuff that gets added is never about the heart. It's always about abstract doctrines or religious procedures. Behavioral lines. Whether it's a formal, official religious system like the Catholic rituals and sacraments, or just the unwritten rules of a church about how you should dress on Sunday, how the song service should be, unwritten expectations about which kinds of events you have to show up for if you're to be taken seriously as a mature Christian,

⁴ Liberals tend to go astray by subtracting from the Word, conservatives tend to go astray by adding to the Word.

smoking, drinking, the language you use when praying out loud, how often you share the gospel with an unbeliever, your body language during worship, procedures in church government. A lot of times we don't even realize the traditions even exist until some new person comes along and violates them. But every church has them. And all those examples I gave have two things in common:

- 1) They are not directly commanded in the Bible.
- 2) They are about procedures, not heart attitudes.⁵

Tradition Hides Distance from God

Legalism is such an insidious strategy that Satan has come up with, because it has self-deception built right into it. You're drifting from God and don't even realize it's because when you look in the mirror to see how you're doing, you look in the wrong mirror. You use the wrong standard to assess how you're doing.

According to James 1:23, what is the mirror that shows the condition of your heart? God's Word—not your behavior standards that you've come up with. It's great to draw behavioral lines and boundaries. If that dating couple says, "We'll hold hands, we'll hug, but no kissing, no time alone in private, etc." that's fine—if they are doing that to guard themselves from temptation. That's wise. The mistake comes when they go to assess how they are doing spiritually, and they use their lines and boundaries as a mirror instead of God's Word. They get to the end of the day and ask, "Did we cross the line physically? No. Great. We did good."

That's not the measure of whether they did good. If they want to know if they did good that day they need to hold up the mirror of God's Word, which goes right to the heart. Hold up the mirror of Matthew 5:28, which says lust = adultery. Hold up the mirror of Ephesians 5:3, **Among you there should not even be a hint of sexual immorality.** With a behavioral rule it's really simple: "Did I do that action, yes or no?" You look at those standards and you see your sin and it calls you to repentance. But if you focus on your actions instead of your heart, and you'll convince yourself you're close to God when your heart is far from him. That's what the Pharisees did. Their hearts were far from God and they had no idea, because they were looking into the wrong mirror to assess how they were doing. And that's why legalists are so critical. They not only use their traditions as a mirror to assess themselves, but they use them for judging other people as well.

Tradition Above God's Word

So, what were Jesus' complaints with the Pharisees? #1 When they cleaned themselves up to approach God, they cleaned the wrong parts—hands instead of heart—outside instead of inside. And #2, they looked in the wrong mirror—human wisdom rather than God's Word. But it gets worse. It's not just that they added human traditions to God's Word, but they elevated their traditions *above* God's Word. Jesus says that three times in vv.8-13 and even gives an example.

8 You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

9 ... You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!

Then he gives an example, then says it a third time:

13 Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

⁵ I contacted my friend in the Eastern Orthodox church who is always telling me why it's better to follow the traditions than Scripture, and I asked him if he could think of any tradition that addressed the heart. He couldn't.

So it wasn't just that they added tradition to Scripture; they elevated their traditions above Scripture. And you can even see that in their complaint against the disciples. The Bible wasn't even on their radar.

5 ... Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders?

They don't even mention the Bible.

The fact that Jesus points it out three times and then gives an example means this is something Jesus really wants us to get. It's inevitable. Any time you add to God's Word, the things you add will eventually become more important to you than the Word itself. It never starts that way, but it's always the way it ends up. Why?

Human Rules Are Easier

Well, for one thing, they make religion a whole lot easier because behavioral rules are so much easier than heart changes. They are easier to understand, easier to interpret, and easier to carry out. Tell me I have to have the same attitude toward the lost as God, that's hard. Tell me to share the gospel with someone at least twice a month—that's a lot more manageable.

The Example

Look at the example Jesus gives of how their traditions nullified God's Word.

9 And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!"

10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'

That's God's Word. The command Jesus picks for his example is not some obscure footnote somewhere in the law. It's one of the Ten Commandments, and it was a law that carried the death penalty if you broke it. So this is something in the Bible that was very clear, very important, very close to the heart of God. So that's what Moses said. **11 But you say ...** Jesus is pitting them and their traditions against Moses and the law of God.

11 But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), 12 then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. 13 Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

In their system, if you declared your estate devoted to God, it was a deferred gift. You can use it all you want while you live, but when you die it has to go to God. And in the meantime, it can't be used for any secular purpose. And in the maze of rabbinic regulations, caring for mom and dad fell into the category of a secular purpose. Therefore it couldn't be used to help mom and dad. So they have God's law, then they build up traditions around that law to make sure they obey it, then the focus shifts to the traditions more than the law itself so that in the end, you're not allowed to obey God's law because it would violate the tradition! I can just imagine God listening to the explanation of why people weren't allowed to support their parents in certain circumstances. "You see, God, it's all very complicated. The making of a vow places all of the man's resources in the category of devoted things which must be reserved for strictly sacred uses and according to rabbi so and so, blah, blah, blah..." And they get through their whole complex explanation of the details of the tradition with all its technicalities, and then God says, "Yeah, whatever. *Honor your parents.*" I wonder how many of our ingenious theological reasonings God just says, "Yeah, whatever—just obey what I said."

God tells us to love one another, and we get into arguments about the best way to do it. "This is the right way to love God and love people, you idiot." We focus on our own application and forget about actual love.

Actions Matter but Aren't the Measure

So, where do actions come in? With all this focus on the heart being the thing that really matters, does that imply that actions don't matter very much? No! Look again at the example Jesus gave. The biblical principle—the heart attitude, was to honor your parents. But how was that expressed? Through financial support—giving them money.

Actions are absolutely crucial. But the meaning of actions comes from what's in the heart, not from the actions themselves. You could give money to mom and dad without honoring them at all, right? The honor is the command, but if you obey the command, it will affect your actions, your speech, your wallet—everything.

Conclusion: Theophobia

I told you the Pharisees had three errors—they washed the wrong thing, they looked in the wrong mirror, and then a third. We'll hold that one for next time. For now, let's just wrap it up by holding up the mirror of God's Word to our own hearts. Is there any area in your life where you are resisting God's will, but that resistance is hidden by a whole lot of great actions? You bring your wife flowers, help her around the house, take her out to dinner, but you don't love her. Wives, you do what your husband says, but you don't respect him. You read your Bible but you don't seek God. You put money in the offering but not out of joy. You sing worship songs, but you don't worship. It's so easy to hide a resistance to God's will. God's will is that our speech be gracious and always beneficial to those who listen and to those we talk about. Our will is to relay some juicy gossip. So what do we do? We morph it into a prayer request. We ask everyone's advice on how to handle the situation. We say just a little bit—not enough to count as gossip (we don't want to step over the line), just enough to satisfy the desire in our heart for that sin. Or if we are in the south we just go right ahead and gossip all we want and they say, "Bless her heart" at the end so it's all good. But what are we doing? We're hanging on to our own will instead of dropping it and wrapping our arms tight around God's will.

Your spouse or someone else hurts you; what is God's will? What's in his heart? Patience, kindness, humility, forgiveness, soft-heartedness, and love. What's in my heart? Revenge, retaliation, bitterness, coldness. So what do I do? I do whatever I have to do to satisfy my conscience that I never crossed the line to full blown revenge and pat myself on the back for my restraint and self-control. But in reality my heart is far from God's heart. I'm a perfect Pharisee. God sends some bitter suffering, and my heart rejects it. I won't embrace God's will.

Why? Because I'm afraid. I'm scared to death of God's will because it feels like if I just let go of this thing I want so bad and embrace what God wants, I won't be happy. I'll lose access to happiness. Sometimes God's will is really painful. And our will is really pleasurable. And it's so hard to believe that if we give up the pleasure and go through the pain, that will result in greater joy than going our own way.

That's totally understandable, right? It's understandable, but it's irrational. It's irrational to be afraid of God's will. It's a phobia (contrary to the way the word is popularly used now, the word phobia refers to an irrational fear). And of all the irrational fears, fear of God's will is the most irrational of all. Because nothing is better for you than God's will. And nothing will make you happier than being near to the heart of God.

Psalm 65:4 Blessed are those you choose and bring near ... We are filled with the good things of your house.

Study Notes

1 The Pharisees ... gathered around Jesus and 2 saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed.

Had they kept watching, they would have seen that Jesus didn't wash his hands either (Luke 11:38).

Modern Day Pharisees

The closest parallel to the Pharisees' religious system today is the Roman Catholic Church. This is from the official RCC Catechism: The Church ... does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.⁶ It's the same with the Eastern Orthodox Church. They place tradition on equal footing with Scripture. They claim the tradition goes back to the Apostles, so it's just as authoritative as the Apostles' writings. That's the same argument the Pharisees used. They said the traditions of the elders were just as authoritative as the Bible because their tradition had been delivered to Moses by God.⁷

So they claim tradition and Scripture are on the same level. But when there is a conflict between the tradition and the Bible, tradition always wins. The Bible says there is only one mediator—the Lord Jesus Christ. The Catholic tradition says Mary is a co-redemptrix with Jesus. So who wins? Tradition. That's always the way it is, because the whole point of human tradition is to make the Bible more clear. A friend of mine was an evangelical all his life, but recently switched to Eastern Orthodox. His reason was all the denominations. He said, “There are so many different interpretations of the Bible—who can say which one is right? But in the Orthodox church, there is a clear body of holy Tradition that spells it all out.” My Eastern Orthodox friend told me the whole reason he left evangelicalism was all the denominations. So many different interpretations of Scripture. Then he found the Orthodox where everyone agrees on the major doctrines. And he told me, you can't just have individuals interpreting Scripture on their own because Scripture is so unclear, people come up with all kinds of divergent views. But the church traditions are crystal clear. They tell you exactly how to behave.

Human Rules Are Easier

The Example

9 And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!”

That phrase **you have a fine way**—that's that same word *kalos* from earlier. There he said, “Isaiah did a good job writing about your hypocrisy,” and here he says, “You guys do a good job setting aside God's commands.” Man, you're good at disobeying God, you're pros at it. No one sets aside God's commands like you do—your skill at disobeying God is matched only by Isaiah's skill in writing about your hypocrisy. Then here's the example:

10 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’

Clearly Jesus affirmed that the writings of Moses are the very Word of God, as opposed to human tradition. And he also affirmed that the first five books of the Bible were indeed written by Moses, so the liberals who now try to deny that have a bone to pick with Jesus Christ.

11 But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), 12 then you no longer let him do

⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church second edition part 1 section 1 chapter 2 article 2 paragraph 82

⁷ m. 'Aboth 1:1–13 cited in NIVAC and Pillar, 208.

anything for his father or mother. 13 Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

The new perspective on Paul teaches that the Pharisees were not legalists. This sounds awfully legalistic to me.

That scenario Jesus comes up with wasn't an exaggeration. There are historical records of that exact thing happening, where someone makes a vow like this, then his parents have need and he really does want to meet that need, but the scribes said, “No. It would be sin for you to use that money to help your parents.”⁸ In m. Ned. 5:6: “It once happened that a man at Beth Horon, whose father was forbidden by vow to have any benefit from him, was giving his son in marriage, and he said to his fellow, ‘The courtyard and the banquet are given to thee as a gift, but they are thine only that my father may come and eat with us at the banquet.’ His fellow said, ‘If they are mine, they are dedicated to Heaven.’ The other answered, ‘I did not give thee what is mine that thou shouldst dedicate it to Heaven.’ His fellow said, ‘Thou didst give me what is thine only that thou and thy father might eat and drink and be reconciled one with the other, and that the sin should rest on his head!’ ” (Danby, Mishnah, 271, italics mine).

How did they defend that policy? Their reasoning was, God is more important than family—which is right on. That's exactly right. Honoring God is more important than anything in life, including family. Jesus didn't have any argument with that. He taught that very thing when he said anyone who loves mother or father more than him is not worthy of him.

The problem isn't that they said honoring God is more important; the problem was over the question of what actually honors God. And even more specific than that, what is the authoritative standard that tells us what honors God—the Bible, or the traditions?

Scribes and Pharisees Background

When I said Jesus only had three complaints against the Pharisees, I'm not including the most obvious error, which was their rejection of Jesus. I'm talking about the problems that already existed in their religious system prior to Jesus coming along.

Being a scribe was a profession. Phariseeism was a sect—like a denomination of Judaism. Just as we have Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, etc.; they had Pharisees, zealots, Essenes, etc. And like most denominations, the reason the Pharisee sect got started was to call people back to getting serious about Scripture (much like the Methodist denomination).

People have criticized the evangelical movement by saying it is a lot like Phariseeism. That's true. We do have a lot in common with them. So did Jesus. If you study the various sects of Jesus' day (the denominations of the time), you'll see Jesus had much more in common with the Pharisees than any of the others. If Jesus were deciding which church to go to, First Church of the Sadducees, First Church of the Essenes, First Church of the Zealots, or First Church of the Pharisees, it would have been the Pharisees. The Sadducees rejected most of the Scriptures and didn't believe in resurrection or miracles in general. The Essenes withdrew into isolation, but Jesus stayed in Israel and participated in the Temple and synagogues. Jesus rejected the violence of the Zealots. When Jesus wanted to give the highest standard for righteousness, he didn't say your righteousness had to exceed even that of the Essenes. He said it had to be even greater than the Pharisees. He even said they sit in Moses' seat, so we should do as they say but not as they do.

So Jesus was closest to the Pharisees, yet there is no one he is in conflict more often than with them. The closer you are to the truth, the more serious it is to get the essentials wrong because you mislead the people who are close to the kingdom.

Jesus really just had two points of departure with the Pharisees. 1) their elevation of the traditions above the Scriptures, and externalism/ceremonialism.

⁸ NICNT.

And those are the two chief dangers of the evangelical church today. Dethroning the authority of the Scriptures, and externalism—solving the problems of the world without addressing the heart. That’s the pattern for how the most vibrant denominations become irrelevant and die.

Fear of God’s Will

Psalm 65:4 Blessed are those you choose and bring near ... We are filled with the good things of your house.

The word phobia has been hijacked in our culture to refer to anything you don’t support politically. So if you’re against homosexuality, they call you homophobic, even though it has nothing to do with fear. That’s a tactic they borrowed from second graders. In the second grade, if the kids wanted to try to control you or manipulate your behavior, they would accuse you of being afraid. “Chicken! Scardy-cat!” Adults in the political realm have now adopted that same tactic, trying to take the discussion away from morality (our real reason for opposing homosexuality) and make it seem like some irrational fear.

The other day I heard a talk show host talking about her fear of drowning and she was trying to think of what the Greek word for that was so she could refer to it as a phobia. But that’s not right either, because it’s perfectly rational to be afraid of drowning. A phobia is an irrational fear—a fear that makes no sense.

The reason people in the world accuses us of homophobia is because they suffer from theophobia—an irrational fear of God’s will. God’s will is nothing but good, yet they are terrified of it. And not just them. All too often we are too, and it’s absolute insanity.