

8. False and true faith

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During the time between the end of the Old Testament and the opening of the New Testament many things took place in Israel. It was one of the most eventful periods in the history of the nation Israel. During the time of their captivity and in this period between the Testaments after they had returned to the land, there was a development of new groups and parties not mentioned in the Old Testament. There were the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes, and the Herodians.

1) Scribes

The scribes had a good beginning. Evidently Ezra was a scribe and the founder of that group. They were the professional expounders of the Law. However, by the time of our Lord they had become "hair-splitters" and were more concerned with the letter of the Law than with the spirit of the Law.

2) Pharisees

The Pharisees also had a good beginning. They arose to defend the Jewish way of life against all foreign influences. They were strict legalists, they believed in the Old Testament, and they were nationalists in politics. They wanted to bring in the coming of the kingdom of God upon the earth with their ways.

3) Sadducees

The Sadducees were made up of the wealthy and socially-minded. They had no spiritual depth. They wanted to get rid of tradition. They rejected the supernatural and were opposed to the Pharisees who accepted the supernatural and accepted the Old Testament. They were closely akin to the Greek Epicureans.

4) Herodians

The Herodians were a party in the days of Jesus who arose as political opportunists. They were strictly a party to try to keep the Herods on the throne.

There is a literal heaven and hell difference between religion and regeneration through Jesus Christ. There are countless religions in this world. Anything other than Christianity is religion.

Allow me to define 'religion'. Religion is human's external effort to obtain God's favor. It is empty faith and it gives false hope to a person.

But Christianity is based on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins. Furthermore, we are saved through His death and resurrection, not by good works we do. In other words, we can receive the regeneration through Jesus Christ, so that we have eternal life.

A. RITUAL, RELIGION, BUT NO RELATIONSHIP

Mark 7:1-5 Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. 2 Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. 3 For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. 4 When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers,

copper vessels, and couches. 5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"

This was another "official delegation" of religious leaders from Jerusalem, coming to evaluate the ministry of Jesus. We saw a previous delegation in Mark 3:22, and they pronounced a harsh, condemning judgment against Jesus. This delegation from Jerusalem has already made up their mind about Jesus.

The concept of evaluating Jesus' ministry was fine. But they did not evaluate Jesus against the measure of God's Word. However, they evaluated Him against the measure of their religious traditions.

The religious leaders speak of elaborate ceremonial washings, not washing for the sake of cleanliness. The observant Jews of that time strictly observed a rigid, extensive ritual for washing before meals.

For these ceremonial washings, special stone vessels of water were kept, because ordinary water might be unclean. To wash your hands in a special way, you started by taking at least enough of this water to fill one and one-half egg shells. Then, you poured the water over your hands, starting at the fingers and running down towards your wrist. Then you cleansed each palm by rubbing the fist of the other hand into it. Then you poured water over your hands again, this time from the wrist towards the fingers. A really strict Jew would do this not only before the meal, but also between each course.

If they were as concerned about cleansing their hearts as they were about their hands, they would be really godly men. We always want to think there is some ritual we can do to cleanse ourselves - like praying or reading the Bible extra or going to church more than once a month.

This Jewish ceremonial cleansing is not in the Scripture of the Old Testament. But it is mentioned in Mishna and Talmud.

- Talmud - The collection of ancient Rabbinic writings consisting of the Mishnah and the Gemara, constituting the basis of religious authority in Orthodox Judaism.
- Mishna - The first section of the Talmud, being a collection of early oral interpretations of the scriptures as compiled about A.D. 200.

Jesus made it clear in the Sermon on the Mount that true holiness is a matter of inward affection and attitude and not just outward actions and associations.

It is true that some traditions are helpful as reminders of our rich heritage, or as "cement" to bind generations, but we must constantly beware that tradition does not take the place over 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.

Mark 7:6-13 He answered and 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 And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' 8 "For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men--the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do." 9 He said to them, "All too well you reject the

commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. 10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' 11 But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban"--' (that is, a gift to God), 12 then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, 13 making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do."

Jesus defended His disciples and exposed the hypocrisy of their accusers. The first thing He did was to quote from the Prophet Isaiah 29:13, and then He brought in the Law of Moses in Ex. 20 and 21. How could the Pharisees argue with the Law and the Prophets? They couldn't.

The Jewish religious leaders came to honor their traditions far above the Word of God.

We may say, "Oh, that was the first century Pharisees. We don't do that." Yes, people still do, even within the rank of Christianity. Some believers would rather honor their denominational rules and regulations more than God's Word. They are the ones who tell the congregation that their denominations' guidelines should be honored above the Word of God which they consider it as an old ancient book that is no longer relevant.

Mark 7:14-16 When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear Me, everyone, and understand: 15 There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. 16 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!"

This is not to say that there are not defiling things that we can take into ourselves – such as pornography. But in this specific context, Jesus spoke about ceremonial cleanliness in regard to food, and He anticipated when all foods would be declared kosher.

Foods or unwashed hands do not make our hearts unclean. They are already unclean to begin with. The only way we can have our hearts cleansed is through grace of God in Jesus Christ.

B. WE DON'T GET IT

Mark 7:17-23 When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. 18 So He said to them, "Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, 19 because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?" 20 And He said, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. 21 For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, 22 thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within and defile a man."

His explanation seems obvious to us, but we must remember that these twelve men had been brought up under the strict Jewish dietary law that categorized all foods as either "clean" or "unclean". In fact, Acts 10:14 suggests that Peter kept a kosher tradition for years even after he had heard this truth. It is not easy to change our religious traditions.

This dramatic lesson on “truth vs. tradition” could only irritate the Jewish religious leaders more and make them want to silence Jesus once and for all. This increased opposition was the reason why He departed from the crowded places and took His disciples into Gentile territory.

Before we leave this section, however, it might be good for us to contrast man’s traditions and God’s truth.

Man’s traditions	God’s truth
Outward forms – Bondage	Inward faith – Liberty
Legalism	Depending on God’s grace and mercy
Outward piety	True inward holiness
Neglect, replace the Word	Exalts the Word of God

There’s a huge danger in looking at this list and saying, “I sure would never do this or that.” If we don’t see the capability of these kind of sins in us, then we are out of touch with the reality of our fallen nature. We are all capable to commit these kinds of sins. The only reason why we don’t is because of the Holy Spirit in us.

C. A TRUE GENTILE BELIEVER

Mark 7:24-30 From there He arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and wanted no one to know it, but He could not be hidden. 25 For a woman whose young daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him, and she came and fell at His feet. 26 The woman was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth, and she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 But Jesus said to her, “Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.” 28 And she answered and said to Him, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children’s crumbs.” 29 Then He said to her, “For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter.” 30 And when she had come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter lying on the bed.

Jesus came to this area which was located about forty miles from Capernaum so that He might have some privacy.

The previous incident shows Jesus wiping out the distinction between clean and unclean foods. Can it be that here, in symbol, we have Him wiping out the difference between clean and unclean people? Yes, at the same time, Jesus in His foreknowledge knew that this Gentile woman would come to Him. He wanted to strengthen her faith in Him.

For the Jews, one of the worst things you could call someone is a Gentile dog. That is what they generally thought of Gentiles. Actually, there were some rabbis who declared that there were Gentiles existing in the world to fuel the hell fire.

However, Jesus used the words “the little dogs” in an endearing way. It could be translated as “puppy.” But it is easy for us to think that Jesus was giving her hard time.

In my opinion it is a stark comparison between the religious Jewish leaders who have been studying the Old Testaments day in day out in their lives completely missed out a great opportunity to greet Jesus who is God incarnate, but this Gentile woman who

was considered as worthless one by the Jews came to Jesus with a genuine faith in Him. They had a religion without God in their hearts, but this Gentile woman had God in her heart without a religion.

It is significant that the two times in the Gospel record when Jesus commended "great faith," He was responding to the faith of Gentiles and not Jews: this Syro-Phoenician woman and the Roman centurion.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Great faith is faith that takes God at His Word and will not let go until God meets the need. Great faith can lay hold of even the slightest encouragement and turn it into a fulfilled promise.

2) God is not impressed with any type of self-formatted religion. But He loves to see us coming to Him with humility and dependence.