

## The King Who Offends Legalists

Matthew 15:1-20

If you're just joining us, we're studying the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament and one of four Gospels that we find there. The word *gospel* means "good news." It's the happy announcement that God has acted in history to rescue his people from their sin, to reclaim this fallen world and establish his rightful rule over it, his *kingdom*, and that he's done so through the life, death, and resurrection of his eternal Son, Jesus Christ. Matthew tells us the story of how God did this, and it's really good news for sinners in need of forgiveness and grace.

But not everybody we meet in this story sees what Jesus is doing as good news. There are several throughout the story who oppose him, and are even offended by him. We met a couple of those groups a few weeks back in chs. 13 and 14. The people in Jesus' hometown, including some of his family members, were offended by Jesus' ministry because they had a category for how God would accomplish his promises and the little boy they watched grow up didn't line up with their expectations. Then we met Herod in ch. 14, who took offense toward Jesus because his own agenda was threatened by Jesus' moral authority and power.

This morning we meet another group who sees Jesus and his ministry and takes offense, the scribes and Pharisees. We've met them before of course, several times. The scribes were experts in the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Pharisees were a religious order who set themselves apart from the rest of the Jews through their system of piety. Most scribes were in fact Pharisees, though not all Pharisees were scribes.<sup>1</sup> And they saw themselves as guardians and gatekeepers of God's Law.

So it is that throughout our story they've been tailing Jesus, challenging him and finding ways to test him—"whether he was really 'sound' or not, whether he was really in line with 'the way things should be done,' or was being disloyal to it."<sup>2</sup>

Here in Matthew 15, they have come all the way from Jerusalem up to Galilee to test him, and the subject they chose for his exam is ritual purity.

### The Hypocrisy of Legalism (15:1-9)

Matthew 15:1-2: "Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.'"

Now, we usually have our kids wash their hands before they eat if they're dirty or if they've been playing outside or something. It's a good hygienic thing to do. But the Pharisees weren't

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Mounce, *Matthew* (NIBC; Hendricksen, 1991), 148.

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One* (Louisville: WJK, 2002, 2004), 193.

concerned about germs here. They're talking about what's called "ritual purity." A ceremonial cleansing that makes one fit for God's presence—the kind of cleansing we see in the Old Testament in chapters like Exodus 30 or Leviticus 22.

But they weren't really asking why Jesus' disciples didn't observe those passages. In fact, those Old Testament laws were specifically for the *priests* who served in God's temple. They didn't apply to anyone else, and they didn't have anything to do with eating everyday meals. What the Pharisees wanted to know was why his disciples didn't observe *their official interpretation and application of those passages*—what they called the "tradition of the elders." For the Pharisees, it wasn't enough just to have the Law. You needed to have an expert opinion that told you what the law meant and how to obey it. And they just happen to have such an expert opinion. They were the keepers of it—an oral law that was passed down by word of mouth from rabbi to rabbi. (The same tradition that was eventually written down in the third century A.D. in what we know as the Mishnah, which is the centerpiece of the Talmud that is still seen as authoritative by practicing Jews today.) And as keepers of that tradition, the Pharisees saw themselves as keepers of the Law itself. The oral law was the key to unlock the written law, so that it could be understood and obeyed, so that one could therefore be accepted by God. And anyone who rejected or ignored that key would find themselves locked out from God and his people.

One such oral tradition was to take the ritual purity requirements for priests serving in the temple, apply them to other aspects of life, and then judge other Jews who didn't observe them. And not just the washing of hands, but as Mark elaborates, "the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches" (Mk. 7:4). And so here, in their examination of Jesus, they want to know why his disciples don't keep this tradition.

Unfortunately for them, asking Jesus this question is a bit like swatting at a beehive. It's about to come back and sting them. Jesus answers their question with a question of his own. Verse 3:

He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? <sup>4</sup> For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' <sup>5</sup> But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, <sup>6</sup> he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. <sup>7</sup> You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: <sup>8</sup> "'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; <sup>9</sup> in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" (Matt. 15:3-9)

Jesus goes straight to the heart of the issue—the hypocrisy of legalism.

Now *legalism* is a word that Christians love to hate (even though we're guilty of it far more often than we'd like to admit). C.J. Mahaney defines it, "*Seeking to achieve forgiveness from God and acceptance by God through obedience to God.* In other words, a legalist is anyone who behaves as if they can earn God's approval and forgiveness through personal performance."<sup>3</sup> Remember that the subject the Pharisees are testing Jesus on is ritual purity. Ritual purity was all about being acceptable in God's presence, able to approach him in worship without being scorched by the heat of his holiness. To be clean, approved in God's sight. The Pharisees sought to gain that approval through obedience to their own tradition.

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<sup>3</sup> C.J. Mahaney, *The Cross Centered Life* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2002), 25, italics his.

If we work backwards through these verses, Jesus identifies the essence of legalism, and thus what's wrong with the Pharisees and their question, by applying the words of Isaiah 29:13 to them: “. . . this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.” According to Isaiah, the problem with legalism is that it is *superficial* and *man-centered*.

First, legalism, at its foundation, is *man-centered*. It centers on what people teach and what people can do, rather than on what God has said and done. “. . . in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (15:9). It elevates man's teaching, man's rules, and gives them the same status as God's Word, and then uses those rules in order to gain approval from God. Legalism is what I call spirituality from below—it's us trying to make our way up to God, rather than trusting in the God who has come down to us from heaven in his Son.

And because legalism focuses on man-made rules, second, it is *superficial*. It fosters an obedience that is only surface deep. “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (Matt. 15:8). They were going through the motions, keeping the rules. But it wasn't about honoring God, it was about manipulating him. Putting on a good show so that they'll receive his approval. Which means it wasn't real obedience; it was play acting. And so Jesus calls them *hypocrites*. Their worship was superficial. As Jesus describes them later in Matthew 23, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness” (23:27).

This is the essence of legalism. It is superficial and man-centered. It makes God's acceptance a matter of personal performance, and then rewrites the rules in order to make it easy for those who have power and control, while trapping everyone else in a cycle of guilt, fear, insecurity, shame, self-righteousness, pride, and envy.

To show them what he's talking about, Jesus gives them an example of their hypocritical legalism in vv. 3-7. On the one hand, God's Word—what's actually written in the Law—commands his people to “Honor your father and your mother” (5:4-6)—the fifth commandment from Exodus 20:12. And Exodus 21:17 goes even further, stating that the punishment for breaking that command under Israel's law was death. Serious stuff. And part of what it meant to honor your parents was care for them in their old age.

But the Pharisees, through their tradition, had come up with a system for avoiding the financial burden of that care. Hijacking another law from the Old Testament about contributions to the temple (e.g. Lev. 27:9, 16), they taught that if one designated the money that would have gone to care for their parents to the temple, they were no longer under obligation to help their parents. It was good for the temple—they got more money. And it was good for the Pharisee—they got the praise of being a generous donor. But where did it leave mom and dad? It would be kind of like donating to a church building project in order to get your name on the plaque, while your parents shop on food stamps and go without proper health care because they can't afford it—and thinking that God is somehow honored by such a gift.

Jesus tells us exactly what he thinks about such a gift before *and* after the example he gives. Verse 3: “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” “So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God” (15:6). Notice in both of those verses the contrast between the tradition of man and the word of God. Not only have the

Pharisees added to God's Word, they've actually *voided* God's Word in the process. The very Word of God that is able to save us and to change us is emptied, nullified when we replace it with our own Word. When we elevate human tradition to the same status or even above God's revealed Word.

Legalism is man-centered and superficial. It ignores God's Word, often adds to God's Word, in order to create a system wherein we're supposed to earn God's favor and approval through keeping the rules. This kind of legalism is so common among Christians, that many of us grow up thinking that this is how our relationship with God works—be good and be blessed, be bad and watch out. And many of those on the outside looking in think the same thing—that Christianity is a man-made, rules-based religion.

But this is not the message of Christianity. This is not the good news of Jesus. As Tim Keller reminds us, legalism says, "I obey, therefore I'm accepted." The gospel says, "I'm accepted by grace through Jesus Christ, therefore I obey." It's not based on my performance. It's based on the performance of Christ in my place. It's based on *grace*—on being given something wonderful, even though I deserve something utterly terrible. A grace made possible through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross in my place. I deserve judgment for my sin; God gives me forgiveness and new life through faith in Christ, because he paid the price of my sin in full.

The problem with legalism is not only that we're putting our words on par with God's Word, but that we're doing so at the expense of the Living Word, Jesus Christ. It is only through Jesus our great high priest that we can draw near to God "with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:22). That's true ritual purity, true acceptance in God's presence, available through faith in our crucified and resurrected King, Jesus. And that's what Jesus elaborates on in vv. 10-20.

### **Gospel-Centered Obedience from the Heart (15:10-20)**

After Jesus rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocritical legalism, v. 10 says: "And he called the people to him and said to them, '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'" (15:10-11).

That's an interesting picture. Is he talking about vomit or spit? How is it that something coming out of our mouths makes us ritually unclean? Peter wonders the same thing in v. 15—what this "parable" means. And so Jesus explains, v. 16: "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person" (15:16-18). In contrast to the Pharisee's version of ritual purity, which was man-centered and superficial, surface-only, Jesus says that true ritual purity is a matter of the heart, and accords to God's Word. He continues in v. 19: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone" (15:19-20).

The opposite of legalism is not license—the ability to do whatever you want. Jesus cares about holiness and obedience. One of the biggest mistakes we make when we bash on legalism is to think that legalism and obedience are the same thing. They're not. Jesus upholds the call to holiness and obedience. He called the Pharisees out for breaking the fifth commandment back in

v. 4, and now he mentions numbers 6, 7, 8, and 9 in v. 19. Obedience to God's Word matters. But it's not the *basis* of our acceptance; it's the *fruit* of our acceptance through Jesus. And it's not about whether we can go through the motions on the surface, but whether we are obeying God from the heart. It's the "righteousness that surpasses the scribes and Pharisees" that Jesus talked about back in ch. 5:20, the Sermon on the Mount. A righteousness that comes from a heart changed by the gospel of Jesus.

You know, most legalists don't set out to become legalists. We often slip into legalism because we care about God's Word. It's just that we've forgotten that our acceptance before God is a matter of grace through faith, and that that's true not just for becoming a Christian, but for the whole of the Christian life. The gospel is a message of grace. As Jerry Bridges puts it so beautifully, "Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the *reach* of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the *need* of God's grace."<sup>4</sup> It's all of grace, from beginning to end.

But when we forget grace, we slip into legalism and make everything a matter of performance. So we come to God's Word, wanting to know and walk with God, but we're filled with anxiety and insecurity about whether we're keeping his Word just so, whether we're performing well enough. We don't want to mess up. We don't want to miss out on God's blessing. And so to dispel that anxiety, we try to spell out more clearly just what it means to keep God's Word.

One of the most common ways we do this is to take a biblical principle and reduce it to a single practice. What I mean by that is this: You take a biblical principle such as sexual purity and fidelity in marriage, and you reduce to a single practice—a certain kind of dating or courting. And if you want to honor God with respect to purity and marriage and be blessed by him, then this is the *only* way to get to know the opposite sex romantically. And we'll judge you if you try it a different way. Because we just don't know what that might lead to if you did it a different way. Or you take the biblical principle of self-control and sobriety—something the Bible teaches—and reduce it to the single practice of avoiding any and all alcohol. If you care about honoring God and self-control and being a good witness, you'll never touch a drop. Because if you do, we don't know where they might lead. *Slippery slope*.

Now there are good reasons that some people avoid alcohol. And drunkenness is certainly sinful. But to make a blanket rule about avoiding it altogether is to add commands to Scripture that simply are not there. It sounds spiritual, but it's legalism. Man-centered, superficial legalism. No different than what the Pharisees did with their tradition of the elders. Here's the law, but *here's* the official interpretation and application of that law. It's adding to the Word of God. It's replacing God's Word and God's vision with our own.

And you can keep going with examples. Alcohol and dating are easy to pick on. What about politics? What about devotional or Bible study habits? What about church involvement? What about school? There's one—if you truly care about raising your kids to love Jesus and preparing them to survive this ungodly world (biblical principle), then you'll send them to private Christian school, or you'll homeschool them (single practice). But if you care about reaching the lost and teaching your kids to reach the lost (biblical principle), then you'll put them in public school—how else will you all get to know non-believers? (single practice).

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<sup>4</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), 18.

And the problem is not always with the practices. There's nothing more spiritual about private school versus public versus home—three great options that each family weighs for their own children and context. The problem is when we elevate our tradition to the same status as God's Word, and then wonder why so and so doesn't keep the tradition? *Do they even know Jesus?*

Practices matter. Holiness matters. But Jesus is interested in what's going on in our hearts. A true holiness that comes from the heart. Has your heart been changed by the gospel of Jesus? Do you recognize the sinfulness of your heart? Have you renounced that sin and come to Jesus in faith? Is your only claim to righteousness his righteous life in your place? Is your only hope for forgiveness the fact that he paid the penalty of your sin on the cross? Or are you still trying to win God's approval and forgiveness through your obedience? Legalistic purity is superficial and man-centered; true purity is gospel-centered and comes from the heart.

And for the legalist, that's a hard pill to swallow. Because it means that I don't really have the control over the situation that I thought I had (go through the motions; get certain results). It means my whole system for evaluating where I'm at with God, or how spiritual somebody else is, is bogus. For the Pharisees it meant their entire system of spirituality was bankrupt. They who claimed to be gatekeepers of the Law were found to be violators of the very Law they claimed to defend. And that made them mad. They didn't like being told that. It's kind of funny, in v. 12, the disciples are a little concerned that Jesus hasn't quite read the situation with their reaction: "Then the disciples came and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?'" Yeah—pretty sure that was the goal. Jesus doesn't have much tolerance for legalism. He says in vv. 13-14, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up." If you try and plant your own kingdom apart from God's Word, or over top of God's Word, God is going to rip it out and throw it away. So Jesus says to his disciples, "Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."

Don't follow the lead of legalists. Follow those who point you to Jesus. Follow those who point you again and again to the full truth of the gospel—that sin really is sinful, because God really is holy; and that grace really is sufficient, because Jesus' blood really is enough.

The gospel is offensive to legalists. Because it means we're not as good as we think we are, and we don't really have the control we thought we had. But to the broken, to the poor in spirit, the sin-sick, the downcast, those with no hope in the world, to those who know that because of what's in their heart, and what they've done with their hands and said with their mouths, that they have no place in God's presence, to those whose only prayer before a holy God is "Have mercy on me, a sinner!" (Lk. 18:13)—to sinners like you and me, *there is no greater news than the good news of Jesus.*

Legalism says, "I obey, therefore I'm accepted." The gospel says, "I'm accepted by grace through Jesus Christ, therefore I obey."

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).  
 "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies

washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb. 10:19-23).