

Title: You know you are a Pharisee when...
Text: Matthew 12.1-8
Theme: What is in the heart?
Series: Matthew #64
Prop Stmt: People who are obsessed with keeping (or breaking) the law do so because they are not focused on the Lord.

Read Text: Matthew 12.1-8

This is a very tricky passage to preach on. I would much rather have preached on the text that David got last week and let him handle this one, but it didn't work out that way. But, here is the most important point that you can get from this. The Bible will never make sense to you until you understand that it is all about Jesus.

The children of Israel had the Old Testament scriptures, but they failed to see and embrace the actual message of the Old Testament scriptures. This is so evident from how they interpreted the 4th commandment. "Remember the Sabbath (the 7th) day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner within your gates." What was the purpose of this? There were several, but the primary one was that God wanted his people to rest so that they would take the time to enjoy one another and enjoy the fruit of their labor, all of which is a gift to them by God. God wanted them to set apart time so that they could enjoy him by enjoying one another. This law was a protection against workaholics and materialism. God was saying "no" to work on the Sabbath so that his people would say "yes" to joy, family, fun and rest. God only tells us no, so that we can experience yes.

Over time, that idea was lost. Now, I want to remind you that the Pharisees did not start out as a group because they wanted to be self-righteous hypocrites who would become the most despised group of people in the Bible. Imagine trying to recruit people to that cause. That was not their original intent. Their original goal was to call the Jews back to living in accordance with the OT law. In some cases, there was debate as to what that looked like, especially as it related to how to keep the Sabbath. In fact, there was a collection of writings known as the Mishnah that had 39 rules on what you could or could not do on the Sabbath. The OT was God's Word; the Mishnah was not. The Mishnah was people's opinions of God's Word, but they were not God's Word. They came up with their own ideas and there is no doubt that these people were sincere and devout. But sincerity and devotion is no substitute for being right. When you add to God's Word your own little rules and use them as the standard, it usually has damning consequences.

Notice what happens. When you have all of these laws it tends to turn everyone in that culture or sub-culture into judges. The laws become the basis of our relationships, which means that many of our relationships are then based on shame or the avoidance of it. That is stifling. That is bondage. That is oppressive. That is fear. "Ha! I caught you! Shame on

you! I saw that!” When you experience that, particularly in a religious sub-culture, then your view of God is usually that of an angry judge who sits poised and ready to pounce upon you with righteous indignation if you show the slightest flaw. When this happens, and it does, how can you ever hope to please a god like this? Now, mind you, this is not how God is. But, this is how God has, at times, been portrayed. So, how can you hope to please a god like this? Either 1) you can’t – and you give up in defeat or bitterness or 2) you act like what you think this god is like and you pounce on others with righteous indignation and pour out buckets of shame on the offenders of the code. That is what these Pharisees are like.

Now, let me set the stage. When we read verse 1 it sounds as if Jesus and the 12 decided to walk through Farmer John’s field and help themselves to whatever it was that happened to be growing because they were hungry. We are used to large fields with roads that go around these large tracts of land. But in Galilee, the roads (which were often paths) went right through the fields. The crops (in this case the wheat) grew right up next to the path. What’s more, the Old Testament law (Lev. 19.9-10) forbade the farmer from harvesting the edges of his field. He left them for the poor and for the sojourner. This, by the way, is very insightful. You do not help a poor person very much by simply giving them food. You help them by giving them the opportunity to work for their food. If they refuse to work for their food, then, they go hungry. It is their decision to be hungry. Of course, if they are incapable of working, that is a different story. But, the farmers left the edges of their fields available for sojourners and the poor. What is more, in Deut. 23.24-25 God gives these instructions to Israel. *“If you go into your neighbor’s vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag. If you go into your neighbor’s standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor’s standing grain.”* In other words, you can help yourself to take care of your hunger, but don’t bring a tractor.

So, Jesus and his disciples were obviously going down a path that went through a wheat field and his disciples began to pluck the heads of grain and they ate. Now, the Pharisees were concentrated in Jerusalem. I am guessing that they were sitting, poised, ready to pounce. We hear it with our kids, don’t we? “Ahhhhh, I’m telling. I’m telling.” What is missing in that? There is no grief, no compassion, no humility, no care and no gospel. Parents, your children are prone to be Pharisees. This is not only true of our children, it is true of our political climate. If you run for office, you have to be prepared that your opponent will more than likely hire a team of private detectives to scrutinize everything that you have ever said or done in order to find something that can be used as a dirty bomb. Guess what? There is no perfect candidate except Jesus and he is not running for office. He is King. But, he is not the king that the Pharisees want, so they find fault with Jesus. Jesus (at least his disciples) is not keeping the code. So, these guys go off like a air-raid siren. Twice Jesus asks/challenges them by saying, “have you not read”? Of course they had read, but they missed the point. Again, you will never understand the Bible, particularly the Old Testament until you realize that it all points to Jesus.

So, what is going on here? Why did the Spirit of God direct Matthew to record this account? Obviously we can see how this event, along with others, adds to the anger and poison of the Pharisees that is going to explode later on in this chapter in an incredibly vile way. But, if we read this and think, “I am so glad that I am not one of those Pharisees, then we are.” We need to read this and realize that this is what we are prone to be like. Thus the title of this message is, you know you are a Pharisee when...

I. You care more about the laws than you do the purpose of the laws. (1-4)

The Pharisees went apoplectic over the fact that the disciples were eating grain on the Sabbath. But, here is what you need to understand. They looked at the grabbing of the grain as harvesting; the rubbing of the grain as threshing, the blowing away of the husks as winnowing, in fact the entire process could have been seen as preparing food for a meal, which was all forbidden by their code. Is that what was meant by not working on the Sabbath? No!

So, what does Jesus do? He takes them back to THE Word, not their additional rules. He points out that when David and his men were running from Saul and were in danger that they desperately needed some food. The only food available was the 12 loaves of bread that were in the Tabernacle. These loaves were placed there every Sabbath and the ones they replaced were only to be eaten by the priests in a designated place. That was the ceremonial law stipulated in the book of Leviticus. In this case, David asks Ahimelech the priest if he could have 5 of the loaves. Ahimelech makes a decision in the moment. He chooses mercy over the ceremonial law and gives the bread to David and his men. In fact, it appears that he gave him all 12 loaves. Ahimelech is not condemned. Why not? Because the purpose of the laws was for God’s people to love, trust, worship and depend on God. God cared for his people. God rescued them from Egypt. God lived with them. God provided for them. The laws were all designed to instill that within them. This bread was prepared by the priests (12 loaves that represented the 12 tribes), and stood in the Tabernacle as a reminder that the nation was living before the presence of God. This was holy. But why was it holy? Because God cared that his people understood this about him. Did David understand this about God? Yes! So, was it okay for David to flippantly walk into the sanctuary and take this bread? NO! But that is not what he did. He asked humbly and the priest gave it to him and God was okay with that. We know that because Jesus points this out to the Pharisees. His point is this: There are times when the ceremonial law can be set aside because something more important is at stake. You need to look at the purpose of the law, not just the details of the law. Underneath the law is a purpose. We get into serious trouble when we lose sight of the purpose of the laws. That is why genuine Christianity demands that you engage your mind because we must consider matters of the heart. Genuine Christianity is not a matter of rules, policies and external conformity.

One night, many years ago, I was driving rather furiously and I broke numerous traffic laws because I had to get my wife to the Emergency Room. I was not only speeding, but in one instance, I drove through a red light after having been alongside a Detroit police car. He did not pursue me. I assured Cathi that he had plenty of more pressing matters to

attend to. Now, I also need to tell you that I had my flashers on, that I never endangered anyone else, and that I only went through the red light after having come to a stop to make certain that traffic was clear. So, while the police officer could have written me a ticket, it was fairly obvious that I was headed straight toward the hospital and he obviously gave me the benefit of the doubt. Why do we have traffic laws? We have traffic laws for the safety of the people who are traveling on the roads. There are times when obeying the laws would be unsafe and therefore, unwise.

What is the ultimate reason of why God gave the Old Testament laws? He gave them to point his people to Jesus. How do they point to Jesus? The Old Testament laws were given to help people realize that they were not holy. They were not righteous. They could not save themselves. They needed a Savior. They needed help. The Old Testament laws were all designed in detail to prepare people by giving them gi-normous hints about the King/Savior who was going to come. Not only that, but the laws were also intended to help protect the people from habits that would be harmful to them. The laws were also given to mark them as a people who were different than the nations around them. Under every law was a purpose. No law was a law unto itself. It was part of a good, helpful, protecting, system that was intentionally incomplete, but was a step toward preparing people for the King. Do you realize that in missing this point that the Pharisees completely missed the entire point of the Bible? Be careful that you are not more concerned with the laws than you are the purpose of the laws. You know you are a Pharisee when ...

II. You care more about the laws than you do the people. (1-4)

How does God respond when his laws are broken? He is grieved. He sends prophets to correct, to remind, and even to warn. He invites. He pleads. He encourages. He nurtures. He prods and finally, when all other avenues have been exhausted, he brings judgment. But, even in judgment he remembers mercy. So, here are the Pharisees who are accusing Jesus and his disciples of breaking the Sabbath law (which they really weren't). They are not grieved; they are enraged. But they are not enraged because of righteous indignation; they are enraged by self-righteousness. If the disciples had really broken the law, then where is the grief and the concern?

This is similar in many ways to the first point so I won't belabor it. But, if you care more about laws than you do people, then you do not understand the heart of God. The laws were intended to be a means to help the people, not crush them. Some of you experience this at your work. Your company handbook of policies is like an encyclopedia. Why? Because people keep finding creative ways to do detrimental things to the company. The default response is to make another rule. Sometimes instead of just dealing with the actual person, a new policy is created. Over time we have all of these policies. Policies can get in the way of actually talking about a situation and gaining understanding.

III. You care more about laws than you do the Lord of the laws. (5-6)

In verses 5 and 6, Jesus elevates the issue to a much higher level. In his first challenge ("have you not read" – v.3) Christ is pointing out to the Pharisees that there are times

when even the ceremonial law can be set aside because something more important is at stake. Now in his second challenge (which begins with the word “or” – v.5) he points out that the priests have to work on the Sabbath. They have to offer the morning and evening sacrifices and fulfill the rest of the Temple duties and obviously they are not condemned. And then (look at v.6) he says something that no doubt enrages them. He says, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” This is where the battle is truly engaged. Here is the tipping point. We know this because of v.14. That is where this is leading.

The Jews had three things that they were so proud of: 1) The Law 2) The Land and 3) the Temple. The law was supposed to point them to their need of God and the Temple was supposed to be the place where God dwelt among them. Both of these were to cause the people to be humble. But, they missed the point of them both. Instead of being humbled by the law and the Temple, they were proud of it. They thought that because they possessed the law and the Temple that they were in some way superior to all others. Superior people do not need to be humble, even before God. They were proud of their law and they were proud of the system that they had created that assured them that they were keeping the law better than anyone else. And along comes this Jesus guy who not only is exposing their system as fraudulent but he tells them that something greater than the Temple is here. Which, of course was true. What made the Temple great? It was the presence of God. The Shekinah (glory cloud of God’s presence) had not been present in the Temple (Holy of Holies) since the days of Ezekiel. Now, the Shekinah had taken on bodily form, and had obviously humbled himself and veiled that glory and was standing there in their presence. Do you realize that if any of these men had walked into the Holy of Holies in the days when the Shekinah cloud was present on the Ark of the Covenant, that these men would have been instantly killed? However, here they are standing in the presence of God and are mercifully spared. But that is not how they see it. That is what is so amazing. Step back for a second.

What is happening here? God in human flesh is engaged in a debate with these peons who have the audacity and arrogance to argue with him. They do not know who is standing before them because they are too obsessed with their laws. They are becoming so angry that they cannot see straight. Why are they angry? They are angry because they have made an idol out of THEIR rules and the Temple. And Jesus is messing with their idols. Jesus will mess with your idols. What do you get angry about? You get angry (sinfully angry) when someone or something is threatening your idols. An idol is anything or anyone that you are trusting in for your identity, security and salvation instead of God. Those who depend on their rule-keeping as their identity and security tend to be rather self-centered and self-righteous because they are attempting to be their own savior. They live as if: Salvation is found in adherence to the code. Holiness is found in adherence to the code. Keep the code. Do not divert from the code. Do not question the code. Do not ask others about the reason for the code.

IV. You care more about external habits than you care about gospel fruit. (7)

Another of way of putting this is that you care more about what you and others do and not about what you and others are. Jesus is more concerned about what you are than what

you do because what you are will eventually drive what you do. That is a primary reason why when we talk about parenting we talk about how we must go for the heart and not just aim for compliance. Jesus is quoting from Micah 6 again (like he did back in Matthew 9) and is telling these Old Testament scholars that they have missed the point of their own law. In verse 7 Jesus is accusing them of not knowing their own law in which God says, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Back in chapter 9 Jesus had already given them some homework. He told them, "Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Now, he is saying that if you had done what I told you to do and if you had figured that out then you would not be condemning the guiltless.

Why does Jesus desire mercy more than performing the ceremonial rituals? Jesus desires us to be merciful people because he is merciful and Jesus is merciful because he is God and God is merciful. When we studied through the book of Exodus some years ago, I remember being jaw-dropping amazed at the account of Moses with God after the rebellion of the nation with the golden calf. Do you remember that? Moses was receiving the law on Mt. Sinai. The nation was getting impatient and replaced God with a golden calf and began to worship it. Moses returned from the mountain and had to address this huge problem. Then God told Moses to step aside because he was going to wipe them out and start over with a nation that he would make from Moses. Moses steps in between the nation and God and says, before you can take them out, you have to take me out. I am one of them. Now, of course Moses did not know it at the moment, but when he did that, God is saying, "Now you're talking! Because when you do something like that, you are acting just like Jesus." What was Moses doing? He was being merciful! But then, God says, "Ok, I will forgive them, but I will no longer be with you. I will give you an angel. And Moses says, "then we aren't going. If you do not go with us, we aren't going. And God says, "Ok, I will go with you." And then, it is as if Moses stops for a second and thinks about what just happened. He is seeing the mercy of God. He, more than anyone else realizes how close to destruction everyone was and how God relented. Moses saw the wrath of God. He knew what was going to happen, so when God relented, Moses is thunderstruck. It is as if, he cannot believe it. But Moses is not only amazed at the mercy of God he is attracted by it. He is drawn to God by God's mercy. This is when he says to God, "Show me your glory." And God says that you can't handle it, but I will do this. And he takes Moses up again on the mountain and places him into a cleft of the rock, where he covers Moses with his hand, and then God, having protected Moses from God (isn't that what the cross is all about?) passes by Moses and as he passes by God talks. And God talks about God. And here is what God says about himself. "*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty...*"

When the people of God, in the name of God, act in a manner that is contrary to God, it is disastrous. It is not only disastrous when we sin in rebellion and live in immorality, it is disastrous when we sin in self-righteousness and fail to be merciful.

I went to a Christian college for my undergraduate training. This was over 30 years ago. The institution at that time was known for its rules and not for its mercy. As a college student, there were many things that I was trying to sort out. I meant well and I was serious about the Lord, but I had an over-sensitive conscience. One winter day, I had gone off campus in order to get my haircut. When I took my coat off in the barbershop, I realized that I did not have a tie on. In those days it was a rule that if you were a guy, you had to wear a tie if you went off campus. I did not intend to break the rule, but I had. I was immediately struck with fear. I immediately got up, ran back to the campus, went to my room, put a tie on, and went back to get my haircut. But, now, since I had broken a rule, I thought that it was my duty to report myself, so I did to a person in leadership in my dorm. He, listened to my confession and then said, that he would let it slide this time, but if I ever did anything like this again I would be busted. He was threatening, intimidating and cold. Perhaps, by God's grace, he would handle that differently now.

You know you are a Pharisee when...

V. You care so much about rules that you miss Jesus. (8)

This point is really a summary of the text since verse 8 is the point of the section. Jesus is Lord of all. He is Lord of heaven and earth, he is Lord of the Sabbath, and he is Lord of Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. He is Lord of your life. He is Lord of the Church. He is Lord. But, (and here is the biggest issue) when you elevate non-essentials to the level of essentials, then you will make essentials into non-essentials. The Pharisees were willing to kill Jesus over their Sabbath rules! Do you understand what I am saying? The Pharisee rules on the Sabbath were extra-biblical. They added their rules to the Bible. They were so zealous of keeping them that they were blind to what really matters. Jesus is what really matters. Jesus is the only way that God can be merciful to them and us. But, when you reject Jesus, you have thrown out your only hope for mercy. And many people, who even today, claim to be follower of Jesus have in reality thrown out the gospel because they refuse to give up their cherished non-biblical and extra-biblical traditions and rules.

What do you do when you finally admit that you are a Pharisee? There is only one hope for Pharisees. Only the gospel of grace can set us free from the bondage of legalism. Acknowledge that you have been trying to perform for God's approval. You have been trying to keep rules in an effort to earn the favor of God. Acknowledge that by doing this, you have tried to save yourself. You have been trying to earn merit in your own efforts. Admit that your good is not good enough. Admit it. Confess it. Freely own it. And then look to Jesus. Look to Jesus. Realize that he lived the life that you could not live. He did it in your place. He was perfect because you are not and on your own, you can never be. He was perfect for you. And then he died for you. That is, he died on the cross as the full and final payment for your sins. His life was lived in your place and his death was the full and final sacrifice in your place. He provided for you, what you could never provide for yourself. The life and death of Jesus was so satisfying and fulfilling to the demands of God that there is nothing left for you to pay. It is yours to receive. It is yours to believe. It is yours to take hold of by faith alone in Christ alone.