

Title: Bad Religion and Vain Worship  
Text: Matthew 15.1-9  
Theme: Traditions that overshadow the truth  
Series: Matthew #81  
Prop Stmt: When traditions become more important than truth, Jesus is always lost.

Read Text:

The history of religion follows a very similar path as politics. Power tends to be concentrated into the hands of a few who hold that over the heads of the many. This creates a sense of bondage and frustration that leads to a rebellion so that new leaders are put in place who then tend to acquire the power and wealth for themselves and hold it over the people and the vicious cycle continues. Therefore, religion has a bad reputation and with good reason. Religion has been dominated by leaders who use the practices and the promises of that religion as leverage in order to gain power not only over people, but in order to gain influence (they think) over God. This leverage has then been used to serve themselves in very sinful ways.

People tend to have a love/hate relationship with religion. You cannot ignore it because we were made to worship. We have an innate believe in the supernatural. But on the other hand, there have been so many abuses in the name of religion. We see this in animistic religions like Voodoo, Islam, works-based religions like the Roman Catholicism, Jehovah's Witness, and the prosperity theology teaching of much of what you see in religious broadcasting. The dominate theme is fear. The leaders claim to possess what the people want (or need), whether that is freedom from demons and disease (Voodoo), eternal pleasure and rest (Islam), forgiveness, or health and wealth (prosperity theology). If you want any of these things, then you have to do whatever your leaders tell you. They hold the power, the people are forced to follow. The Pharisees determined who was accepted and who was an outcast. Outcasts were not allowed in the synagogues or at the Temple. Outcasts could not do business and were frozen out of power and influence. What did the Pharisees possess? What did the Pharisees promise? They promised acceptance, identity, approval, business relations, community connections, and paths to success for your children. In order to have access to those, you had to do what they said. You had to follow their rules. This is what the Jewish religion had degenerated to in the time of Christ and it is why he was such a threat and was hated so much. He was hated by the leaders because he threatened their hold on power that was never ultimate theirs.

The Pharisees have a grip on power and they are not going to let it go without a fight. That is obvious from the very first phrase. "*Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem...*"

1. **Rules-based righteousness hates Jesus.** (1)

(map of Israel)

Jesus and the disciples are in Gennesaret (14.34). They are in Galilee. They are in the backwoods, obscure, insignificant area of the low-lifers. This is 86 miles north of Jerusalem. And considering the fact that the Pharisees and scribes would have avoided Samaria, they probably walked over 90 miles in order to confront Jesus. And what is it that is so important that they will go 90 miles one-way to this area in order to address? Your disciples “do not wash their hands when they eat.” And we read that and think, “What? Are you kidding me? You walked 90 miles for that?” It sounds like momma calling the camp on Tuesday morning to see if little Johnny changed his underwear.

We know what is really motivating them. They hate Jesus. And why do they hate Jesus? They hate Jesus because they hate God. They do not say that. They say that they love God and in fact, they say that they love God better than anyone else and that no one can measure up to them and therefore, God loves them more than he loves anyone else. And by doing this, they have put themselves into a position where they presume to speak on behalf of God. Instead of representing God, they are misrepresenting God. Instead of giving people freedom and hope, they give them rules that put people in bondage and bring despair when they can't keep the rules. Jesus is exposing that. He is exposing the fact that these people were using their positions to oppress people instead of helping them. And by exposing them, he aroused their hatred. Hatred of the gospel motivates many sacrifices.

The theme of Matthew's gospel is: Behold your King! Jesus is a king, but not like Herod. and now we are seeing that he is not like the Pharisees either. In Jerusalem, both Herod and the Pharisees will come together in opposition to Christ.

## 2. **Rules-based righteousness makes its own rules.** (2)

V. 2 introduces us to “the tradition of the elders” which the Pharisees and scribes are most concerned about while v. 3 contrasts that with “the commandments of God” which Jesus is most concerned about. I have told you before that the Pharisees did not start out to be Pharisees. Their goal was to make the Word of God practical and understandable for the common man. These traditions were supposed to be a fence that protected the Scriptures. They discussed and debated how the laws should be applied. Could you do any work on the Sabbath? If so, how much? People need to eat, but preparing the food is work. Things happen on the Sabbath, like catastrophes and tragedies. Are you allowed to help someone on the Sabbath? What if you want to give something to a poor person on the Sabbath? Can you do that? If you carried your gift on the Sabbath to the poor person, you were doing some work. If you left your gift outside your door, and he came over and picked it up, then he was doing some work because he was carrying the burden. This was debated and debated and debated until it was determined that if you took the gift to your door, then the poor person could reach inside your door and you could give it to him. That way, you had not carried it on the Sabbath and he did not pick it up on the Sabbath. No one was completely at fault because you did not set it down outside, and he did not pick it up. And since no one completed the act, neither party would be guilty of violating the Sabbath. Now, take this one situation and multiply by hundreds and you get a sense of what burden was being placed on the people. All of these rules became known as “The

Tradition of the elders.” These traditions eventually became known as the Mishnah. These traditions were not in the Scriptures, but were additions to it.

The hand-washing rule is a perfect example. God commanded the OT priests to wash their hands before and after they offered sacrifices (Ex. 30.17-21). The commandment was only for the priests who were offering sacrifices at the tabernacle (later the temple). The Pharisees determined that if it was good for them, then it should be good for all and made that a rule. Washing your hands before you eat is a good idea, but it is not a sign of holiness and it is not a means by which you earn the favor of God. If your dad or mom tells you to wash your hands, then wash your hands, because God tells you to obey your dad and mom. But, washing hands is not a command from God for personal purity.

But over time, the traditions became more important than the Scriptures and in fact, the main message of the Scriptures was lost. Jesus gives an example of that when he demonstrates how the Pharisees preferred their rules over the Scriptures and eventually distorted the Scriptures.

### 3. **Rules-based righteousness distorts God’s Word.** (3-6)

This is a serious issue and Jesus goes right after it with a holy vengeance. He doesn’t even waste a breath on the hand-washing thing, does he? Wait a minute, we just walked 90 miles for that, and he won’t even give us an answer. No, he won’t because it is ludicrous, and what is more ludicrous is that they are so concerned about things that do not matter that they have lost sight of the things that do matter. In fact, what they thought was his problem (and the disciples) was actually their problem. Jesus then addresses the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment in which God states, “Honor your father and mother.” Then he states (end of v.4) that a person who does not honor his parents is guilty of a crime that is punishable by death under the OT law. Obviously breaking a direct commandment of God is serious enough. But drawing attention to the prescribed punishment only heightens the level of offense. So, let me explain. As a child, honoring your parents means that you are to obey them. As an adult, honoring your parents means that you are to provide for them if they are in need. If they need care, if they need a place to stay, if they need food, you are to provide it for them. Parents are to provide for their children and are supposed to teach their children to work hard so that the children will be in a position to be able to provide for their parents when parents are too old to work. Men who would not work and provide for their families were said by Paul to be worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5.8). This is a serious issue.

But taking care of your parents takes time and it can take a lot of money. The Pharisees had come up with an idea that was called “Corban” which simply meant gift. This is what Jesus is talking about in verse 5. Here is what you could do. Let’s say that they had \$100,000 in savings. They could formally declare that \$100,000 was Corban. The money was a gift to God that would go to the Temple upon their death. Since, it was a gift to God, and set aside for him, it was not available to be used for their parents, however, it was available for them to use it. In fact, after their parents died, they could take it back. Such a deal, right? They could get credit for appearing to be really pious by making what

appeared to be a great donation to God, but did not actually have to give it to God, but neither did they have to spend it on taking care of their parents, but could actually use it for themselves. Now, in many cases, this meant that the brothers and sisters had to pick up the slack because they were unwilling to do their part. They were too dedicated to God to be bothered with such mundane matters. What a contrast this is to Jesus. Over and over we see how because Jesus is truly dedicated to God (he is God) that he is concerned about mundane matters. What a king!

So, the Pharisees and scribes take their own rules and use them as an excuse to disobey God's commandments. Notice the contrast between 4a and 5a. "'God commanded" "But you say". Ok, let me review how this happens.

- 1) It starts with a desire to protect and promote good things.
- 2) Policies are made to protect and promote good things.
- 3) Over time, keeping the policies becomes more important than the good things.
- 4) What is left are the policies because the good things are lost.

Let me give you an example. Casual dress is very common today and the wearing of ties is reserved for formal events. So, in many churches guys not only do not wear ties, but the culture of that particular church discourages it because ties are associated with formality and rigidness and putting on a front and therefore, not being real, or myself, or whatever. So, what is the desire? The desire is to have a church where people do not feel as if they have to adhere to a formal dress code in order to be a good Christian. We would all agree with that. We know the gospel. We know that you do not become a Christian based upon what you wear and you do not become a better Christian based on what you wear. You become a follower of Christ based on one thing. You must repent of your sin and trust in Christ alone as your Savior. You grow and mature as a follower of Christ based on how you apply the gospel to every part of your life. The gospel is not based on your works or rules, it is based upon what Christ has accomplished and secured for us, so it is patently absurd to think that I can wear a particular clothing style and it will somehow cause me to love God more, to cherish Christ more, to love the gospel more and to hate sin more. I think that we get that. We do not want to have a formal dress code that demands that people look a certain way because that doesn't match the message of the gospel. That is a good desire. However, in your zeal for that good thing a church may create a policy (written or assumed) that says guys in this church do not wear ties because that looks like you are trying to impress others with your formal dress. What have you just done? You have subtly shifted the attention from what matters to what doesn't. So, when an older guy like me shows up, who from time to time wears a tie, how am I made to feel? I am marginalized because of the code, and the desire to keep the cool factor in church has become more important than the people the church is supposed to minister to. Do you seriously think that you are going to stand before God and he is going to say, "Yes! You did it!! You went to church your entire life and you never wore a tie?! Here, just for you there is a special star for your crown and you get the Jacuzzi suite mansion.?" And by the way, I am certainly not arguing for ties. Someone commended me one week for wearing a tie, which of course meant that next week I didn't wear one. It does not matter. Now, we laugh about the absurdity of those things and we can see the absurdity of

it in others, but we are all in danger of creating our own rules beyond Scripture that we use to measure the sincerity and integrity of others. It is a serious danger. Jesus says...

#### 4. **Rules-based righteousness is idolatry.** (7-9)

You hypocrites!! You shysters!! Jesus is intense and rightfully so because they are using words that identify them as people who honor the Lord, but their heart is not engaged. Jesus is not impressed with just words. He is worthy of your heart. You may know what you are supposed to say, but if your heart is not in it, then it is not true for you. And if it is not true for you, then your worship is in vain. It is empty. It is meaningless.

Rules-based righteousness is a false righteousness because I find my sense of righteousness in comparison to another person. In a rules-based righteousness I find my sense of worth in being better than someone else, which leads me to believe (falsely) that if I keep the rules better than you, then Jesus loves me more than he does you. Or, if I can answer all of the questions with the right answers then I am not only ok, but I am better than the one who does not know all of the answers.

(8-9) Jesus loves you too much to let you get away with a religion that just goes through the motions. Jesus is too glorious to tolerate worship that is fulfilled by people who just go through the motions. Therefore, genuine Christianity is not made up of people who just go through the motions. Christ will settle for you empty words. He demands your whole being.

#### **Stuff to Chew on:**

It is true that Jesus reserved his harshest words for religious people and was most gentle to the outsiders, but that statement that is often made needs clarification. Being religious can be beautiful and glorious, if you are truly following Christ. In fact, true religion (not the jeans) is the greatest cause and highest goal in all of life, which means that bad religion is the worst. So, it is more accurate to say that Jesus reserved his harshest words for people who were falsely religious. Bad religion is not only damning to the people who follow it, but it leaves people with no faith, with no motivation to pursue faith.

- Bad religion and vain worship is the worship of the wrong god.
- Bad religion and vain worship is also the wrong belief about the right God.
- Bad religion and vain worship is the right belief about the right God, but a hypocritical life.

The Pharisees had the wrong belief about the right God, and were hypocrites of their own belief. Since they claimed to be the formal representatives of God, they presented a false view of God. False religion and no religion are equally damning. It's just that false religion and its hypocrisy appears to give an excuse to those with no religion.

When you act as if minor issues are primary issues, you will lose or distort primary issues. What is so attractive about minor issues that we tend to focus on them? Minor

issues are tempting to focus on because we think we can measure our spirituality by them. We are all tempted to trust in our own righteousness, not only for salvation, but for spiritual growth. It is wrong. My hope, rest, peace, confidence is never in how well I keep the rules. It is always in Christ. Now, are there rules that Christ has established for his people to follow? Yes, absolutely! But, I do not follow them in order to be a believer, I follow them because I have become a believer. I do not follow them because my obedience will earn me points, I follow them as a believer because I, by faith consider Christ worthy of my obedience and affection. When that reality is the culture of a church, then, very little attention is given to minor issues that are not addressed in the Bible. It really does not matter if the building has carpet and drywall or tile and wood. It really does not matter if the church has a choir and orchestra or a praise team and band. It really does not matter if the leaders wear robes or jeans.

Rules-based righteousness is so subtly dangerous that we are tempted to find our justification in the fact that we are not like the Pharisees instead of actually trusting in Christ.

Questions for you to consider:

- 1) In your opinion, what are the ingredients of a great church or a great service? And, are all the ingredients that you come up with established in the Scriptures as being necessary for the church? For example, what does the Bible say about Mother's Day or Father's Day? Nothing!! What does the Bible say about Veterans Day, Memorial Day, or the 4<sup>th</sup> of July? Nothing! Can we say something and even do something around these days? Sure, we can. Should we? That's a different question. Should we? Must we? No. We can, but if we do, it does not make us a good church. And if we do not, it does not make us a bad church.
- 2) In your opinion, what are the ingredients of a healthy Christian? And, are all the ingredients that you come up with established in the Scriptures as being necessary for a mature believer?

I am not trying to irritate you. I am trying to protect the gospel from being marginalized by lesser things, even if those lesser things are good things.