

The Problem With Religious Rule Keeping

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Date: 20 July 2025

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[0 : 0 0] Well, if you know me, you might be tempted to call me a germaphobe. I think that's an unfair label myself.

I think it's perfectly reasonable to not like germs and to do everything I can to avoid them. Which I do. So I've got certain rules in my life that I've developed over the years.

Like, for example, I tend not to eat cake at children's birthday parties. That's one of the rules that I have. Especially after seeing a seven-year-old just blow out their candles with an equal mixture of breath and saliva.

And so I turn down when I'm offered a cake at children's birthday. This is one of the things I do. I think it's totally reasonable to do that. I tend not to touch my face with my hands.

It's another thing I do. Whenever I come home, the first thing I do is I wash my hands. I go to the bathroom and wash my hands. You know? I think those are perfectly reasonable things to do.

[1 : 0 9] You might call me a germaphobe. That's your problem. But that's probably why I was also initially uncomfortable coming to Matthew 15 and reading the story about Jesus defending his disciples for not washing their hands when they eat.

And I was thinking, you know, maybe Christians are going to take this as a kind of permission to do the same. And I was shocked at the possibility that we might read this and go, well, we don't have to wash our hands when we eat.

Until, of course, I realized that's not what this passage is about. It's not about hygiene at all. It is about washing hands, but it's not about hygiene. So, for the record, we should still all wash our hands.

Okay? Before we eat. Doctors tell us that's a very good thing to do. But this passage, as I say, it's not about hygiene. It's actually a passage about spiritual cleanliness and spiritual purity.

And the question that is raised here, which is a very important question, is what makes us clean and unclean before God? And Jesus, what he does in this passage, talking to these Pharisees, is he exposes the tendency we can all have to be what I might call spiritual germaphobes.

[2 : 3 2] Where we have rules in our lives that we follow in order to be spiritually clean. And we do certain things and we refrain from certain things so that we can keep ourselves spiritually clean.

And Jesus talks about that kind of tendency that we all can have to follow religious, spiritual rules in our lives. But what he goes on to show, we're going to see in this passage, is not only that it doesn't work, but it can actually have the very opposite effect.

And make us more spiritually sick. And so let's see what he teaches us this morning in this passage. So let's take it from verse 1 and see what happens and how Jesus exposes to us through his conversation with these Pharisees the problem with religious rules.

Verse 1, some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem. Okay, let's pause there. This is important.

This is the first time Jesus is dealing with Pharisees from Jerusalem. He's up in Galilee. He's been ministering there and he's been dealing with the local spiritual leaders, the Pharisees and the scribes. But now we're told Pharisees from Jerusalem come.

[3 : 54] So these are the top dogs. Okay, maybe I don't know. Maybe they were called by the local Pharisees who said, hey, we've really got a problem with this wayward rabbi.

We need your help to come and sort him out. So here come the Jerusalem Pharisees. These are the big boys. Okay, and so they come and they check out Jesus and his disciples and they immediately notice something wrong.

Verse 2, why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat.

Now you can imagine the local Pharisees. Ah, yes, that's the problem. You see, I knew there was something wrong. You see these guys, I knew they were dodgy. Now, as I say, the problem here is not about hygiene.

It's about Jewish customs and Jewish cleansing rituals that they have and washing hands before eating. So they were very serious about what particular foods they ate.

[4 : 56] We see that in the Old Testament. But they also developed this whole system of rules about what to do in preparation for eating. And there's cleansing rituals that you take part of so that you can prevent being tainted from the outside world.

That was the idea of these cleansing rituals. There were things you did to make sure that you weren't tainted by the evil world outside. And these Pharisees were experts in the rules that you follow to not be tainted by the outside world.

They were the top spiritual germaphobes of Israel. But what we see, and we've seen it already in Matthew so far, and is often the case with those who love rules, is that they were actually hypocrites.

And it's here that Jesus takes the opportunity to expose them for what they really are. So let's see how Jesus answers from verse 3. Jesus replied, And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?

For God said, Honor your father and mother, and anyone who curses father or mother is to be put to death. You say, That if anyone declares what might have been used to help their father or mother is devoted to God, they are not to honor their father or mother with it.

[6 : 22] Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Okay, so you see what's going on here, what the conversation is.

The Pharisees come along from Jerusalem and they say, Oh, you see, this is the problem with you and your disciples. You're breaking the traditions. Jesus answers to them, Well, in keeping the traditions, you're breaking God's law.

Whoo! That's a big, serious comeback. And you can understand why from this moment they wanted Jesus out of the picture. He doesn't hold back.

He tells them what's really going on. And that accusation that they're breaking God's law, which is a much bigger accusation than, you know, you're breaking some Jewish traditions. He goes on to prove with another tradition that they had.

And the tradition that he talks about is you could devote money to the temple, a particular amount of money that you had saved. You could devote it to the temple.

[7 : 26] And the rule, according to Jewish tradition, was that you couldn't use this money if you've devoted it to the temple. You couldn't use it for anything else, even to look after your aging parents.

And back then, there was no other source of welfare for elderly people other than their children. And so what was happening is people, by keeping this tradition of the elders, people were getting out of their responsibility to look after their parents financially.

And in doing so, they were breaking God's law to honor your father and your mother. And so you see what was happening, and this is what Jesus wants them to see, is that keeping religious rules, keeping their rules, was actually covering over a failure to do what God really wanted.

There was a big difference between the religious rules they kept and what God really wanted. And Jesus here exposes that keeping the rules was actually taking them away from what God wanted.

And then what Jesus does to kind of put the final nail in his argument is that he quotes Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah, who saw people doing exactly the same thing in his day.

[8 : 42] From verse 7, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you. These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And this is the crux that Jesus is getting at you.

You see, he's saying, and this is what we need to hear. Everybody needs to hear. He's saying there's a way to look godly on the outside, but not be on the inside.

In Jesus' day, in Isaiah's day, and in our day. And we know it. We see it, don't we?

There's a way to look good and godly on the outside, but not be godly on the inside. It reminds me actually of these secondhand cars you see being sold on Facebook Marketplace.

[9 : 44] You know, and sometimes you're scrolling Facebook Marketplace and you see this car and it looks great and it's shiny. And the paintwork is pristine and the hubcaps are polished and it looks like a brand new car and it's going for an amazing price.

And you think, oh, maybe I can get this car. But you know, there's probably something wrong inside. Right? That's probably why it's going for such a rock bottom price.

Because the gearbox is faulty or the engine is faulty or something. But you can't see it. On the outside it looks great. Well, Jesus is saying, people are like that.

People are like that. And we can all be prone to looking good on the outside or looking different on the outside to what we are on the inside.

All of us could be prone to that. And that's what Jesus is exposing to us here. Because we naturally want to look good, don't we?

[10 : 49] It's a human thing. It's part of our nature to want to put on a good impression. It's all about the optics. We naturally want to look. And as Christians, we also have the tendency to want to look like good Christians.

Christians love to show how Christian they are. By what we do when we're with other Christians. By what we do out in the world. By how we live when people are looking at us.

We love to show how Christian we are. We even love to show how Christian we are to ourselves. By doing certain things that make us feel like good Christians.

I'm doing the right thing. I'm on the right side. Well, Jesus here is opening our eyes to the fact that it is possible to tick all the boxes.

To look really good on the outside. But still have a heart that is far from God. It is very possible. And it happens often.

[11 : 54] You can go to church every Sunday. You can be the most consistent attendee at church. You can even go to prayer meeting. Once a term. You can know your Bible inside and out.

You can serve others. You can give money generously to the church. You can be a good Christian. But according to Jesus, your heart can still be far from God.

Even though you are doing all these things. Your heart can still be far from God. You can do all these things and still not truly love God above all other things.

You can do all these things and be a great Christian on the outside. And still you love other things in the world more than God.

You don't have a real living active relationship with God. And the problem is that the good works we do often prevent us from even realizing this.

[12 : 56] You know, non-religious people, atheists or people who don't go to church, they know that they are far from God. But Christians can be far from God but not know it.

That is the problem. It is even more dangerous for us. Because we do these, we come to church, we have these rules in our lives that we do daily devotion. We pray, we can do the things and still have hearts that are far from God.

That is what Isaiah saw, that is what Jesus is saying. And the problem is that we can often not realize that our hearts are far from God.

They can drift away from God without us realizing. Because of our Christian habits that we keep. Now I am not saying those habits are bad things.

Of course it is good to come to church, it is good to come to prayer meeting. These are vital parts of living the Christian life. But there is a danger that they will cover over the state of our hearts.

[13 : 59] That is what we need to see this morning. Like painkillers. You know, if your doctor gives you painkillers. If you have an issue deep down inside, maybe you have some kind of disease.

There are drugs that your doctor can prescribe you that today, there are drugs out there that can cover over symptoms. They can deal with the symptoms of the disease. And sometimes they can be so good at doing that, that you forget that you have the disease at all.

That is the kind of thing Jesus is talking about here. That is the danger that we can face as Christians. That we do these things. We do our Christian habits. We do our Christian duties.

And they can be like the painkillers. They can be like the symptomatic cures that make us forget or not see that we have a heart that is perhaps still far from God.

That we still have a problem. Jesus is saying that is the problem with religious rules. That is what religious rule keeping does.

[15 : 04] And so, the challenge to us this morning, based on this first point, is to think, each of us should think about the rules you keep. And you have a set of rules.

You might not call them rules, but there are certain habits you have. There are certain weekly things you do, daily things maybe you do. The rules you keep that make you feel like you are a good Christian.

What are they? What are the things that you do that make you feel like you are a good Christian? Think about those things. And then ask, how might they be covering over a heart that is far from God?

So, if you stripped away all of those other things, if you stripped away all the things you do that make you feel like you are a good, decent Christian, and you actually take a look under the hood at your heart, at what you really desire, what would you find?

Now that is sometimes a scary question to ask. We often don't want to do that. We often don't want to look at our hearts.

[16 : 16] Because of fear of what we might find when we do. We often like to just look at the external. We like to just focus on what we are doing so that we don't have to look at our hearts.

Because when we look at our hearts, what are we going to find? But that is what Jesus challenges us to do. And especially because of what He reveals next, which is the true state of the human heart.

And it is not comfortable reading, but we have to hear it. The true state of the human heart. So, the question that is being raised here that Jesus is talking about with these Pharisees is what really defiles us?

What makes us bad people? What makes someone a bad person? Right? That is a big question. That is like one of the biggest religious questions you could ask.

What makes someone... In fact, actually, it is not even a religious question. It is also a secular question in society. Because society also has a sense of good and bad people. Even if people aren't religious, they have got a sense of who is a good person and who is a bad person.

[17 : 26] So, everybody actually has some kind of answer to this question. What makes someone a bad person as opposed to a good person? Anyway, that is the question going on here. The Jews say, well, what makes you a bad person is what you allow into your life.

Jesus says, no, it is what comes out of you that shows that you already are. And that is a world of difference that we need to understand.

Look at what he says in verse 11. Jesus says, what goes into someone's mouth does not defile them. But what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.

The disciples ask him to explain what he means. And then from verse 17, he says, Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body.

But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts.

[18 : 28] Murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. What Jesus is teaching here is a key Christian doctrine called the doctrine of original sin.

It is what the Bible teaches that from the moment we are born, we already have sin inside us. That's the doctrine of original sin that Jesus is talking about here.

We don't become sinners when we sin, but we sin because we are already sinners. You see the difference?

You don't become a sinner the first time you sin. But the first time you sin, you sin because you already are a sinner. That's what Jesus is trying to teach, but the Jews won't have it. His disciples don't even understand it at first.

But that's the key teaching here. The doctrine of original sin that we're born with that disease already from when we're babies. The sins we commit later in life are just symptoms of the disease we already have.

[19 : 43] That's what the Bible clearly teaches. Verse 19, For out of the heart come evil thoughts.

Out of the heart. Out of the heart. Those thoughts that you have, that you know are wrong. Those feelings that you feel that you would never want anyone to know about, that you're actually ashamed of.

Where do they come from? Where do they come from? Where do they come from? Outside? Or are they already here?

Out of the heart comes, what does he say? Murder, adultery, sexual immorality. Out of the heart comes sexual immorality. Those fantasies that you entertain.

I don't know, late at night. Those things that you would never tell anyone about that you fantasize. That desire to click on that link, to open that website and to look at those sorted, disgusting videos and images.

[20 : 59] But you just have a desire to click on that. Where does that desire come from? It's already there. Out of the heart comes theft, false testimony.

Slander, slander. Slander. Comes from the heart. Those uncharitable thoughts you have about another human being, maybe at work. Or the person who cut you off in traffic.

Or whoever it is. And you think just unkind things about another person made in God's image. Where do those thoughts come from? Jesus says they're already there.

Inside us. Inside us. We all have this sin deep down inside us.

And we don't like to admit it. And we don't like to hear about it. And we think, well as long as they don't come out, then I'm okay, right?

[22 : 12] As long as I can control the desires. As long as I can be good on the outside. Then I'm still a good person, right? Well Jesus says no. But we think, well as long as I deal with the symptoms, I can ignore the disease.

Jesus says we can't. You see, we've got to learn. The world and the way people think. And the way religious people think.

And the way many Christians think. Is what I'm talking about. Is just making sure we're doing the right things. We're looking good on the outside. But we ignore the inside.

We ignore how sordid our hearts actually are. As we were hearing earlier, you know, as the prophet said there. The heart is deceitful above all things. It is desperately sick.

As we say in our liturgy, there is no health in us. But do we really mean it? Do we really think about that? We don't like that idea. Of thinking about our hearts like that.

[23 : 17] We've got to be able to look at our hearts. And we've got to learn to see what these symptoms, the thoughts and desires that we have.

What they actually point to. And that's what a good doctor will do. If you come to a doctor and you've got a problem. He'll look at your symptoms. But he won't just give you things to treat the symptoms.

He will ask what are the symptoms pointing to. What is the underlying cause? But often, and often what religion will do, every other religion and even often forms of Christianity will just give us ways to deal with the symptoms.

And help us to ignore the cause. We can't do that. We've got to learn to see what the symptoms point to. These thoughts and attitudes that we have, they point to hearts that are desperately sick.

Your heart is desperately sick. My heart is desperately sick. With sin. And it's gross. It's gross. When we consider the kind of thoughts and desires that our hearts can entertain.

[24 : 32] While on the outside, we can be respectable people. Clean living. On the inside. On the inside. Our hearts by nature are no better than that junky prostitute with needle marks in her arms who we would never invite into our respectable homes.

That's the kind of picture that Jesus is exposing of our hearts here. And it's uncomfortable to see that, but it's vital because only when we see our hearts like this, do we also realize that no amount of rule keeping will fix them.

No amount of religious rule keeping will fix the problem. What we really need is new hearts. That's the only hope.

New hearts. And that, that is what God offers us in the gospel. That is why we make such a big deal of the gospel.

That's why the gospel is the best news that broken humanity has ever heard. It's because in the gospel, God offers us nothing less than completely new hearts. You know, in Ezekiel 36, when this was hundreds of years before Jesus came and God through his prophets was telling us his plan to save us.

[26 : 07] He puts it in these words in Ezekiel 36. He says, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and I will give you a heart of flesh.

I will give you a new heart that is a promise from God to his people. That is how he's going to save us. That is why Jesus came. And that is why he died. And that is why he rose.

And that is why he poured his Holy Spirit onto his church to change our hearts. To change you and me. To change our desires.

To change what we love. To change what we want in our lives. To change what we live for. That is what being saved is about. And if God has not done that, you are not yet saved.

You can have been coming to church for years, but if he hasn't changed your heart, then he hasn't done what he promised to do to save. You haven't let him change you.

[27 : 15] Because that is what being saved is about. Having a new heart. You know, being a Christian is not just getting a touch-up. Not just getting a new paint job.

Or touching up the rust. Being a Christian is having a complete engine overhaul. You know, this is something I realized in my own life as a young adult.

Because I had grown up in the church. I had grown up in a Christian family. And I had gone to church. And for years and years and years, I thought I was doing everything I needed to be a Christian.

But only when I look back now, did I realize how far my heart was from God. There were so many other things I wanted in life. There were so many other desires that I had.

That's what my heart was chasing. And God woke me up to that fact. When I was a young adult, I realized my heart was far from Him.

[28 : 24] I realized I needed to change. But I also realized I couldn't change myself. No matter how many things I introduced into my life, good habits, I couldn't change my heart.

I still wanted what I wanted. My heart was still far from God. So what I did when I realized that was that I came to Him. And I repented and I said, I can't change me. Please change me.

And He did. From that moment when I realized that about my heart. And I realized I couldn't change it. And I came to God and I gave up to Him.

I gave up control to Him. That's when He started to change my heart. He changed my heart. And He still is changing my heart. Because I'm still reminded daily that by nature, there is no health in me.

But by grace, God is changing me from the outside. And He can do that for you as well. He can give you a complete engine overhaul.

[29 : 35] He can replace that ugly, wayward heart with a new heart that really loves Him. And is fit for His new kingdom.

Do you want that? Who wouldn't want that? Who wouldn't want a new heart that is beautiful and not sordid with sin?

But that has right desires. That has godly desires. Who wouldn't want that? Well, I'll tell you who wouldn't want that. The person who thinks they don't need it because they keep the rules.

The person who won't let God change them because they don't really think they need to change. And there are a lot of those people in church. There are a lot of people who come to church every Sunday who don't really think they need to change.

Maybe, maybe, you know, they'll take a few things from the sermon and take a few things from the Bible and touch up their life here and there. But that's all they think that Christianity is just a bit of touch up.

[30 : 45] But not a complete engine overhaul. And they won't change because they don't realize how much they need to. Don't be one of them.

Don't put your confidence in the external. Don't put your confidence in your good religious rule keeping. But learn to see your heart for what it really is. And then come to God.

With that sordid, messy, sinful heart. He has already seen. God has already seen that heart.

Before you come to Him and open up to Him and admit who you really are. God has already seen that and He still loves you anyway. Out of His grace.

God has already seen that. God has already seen that. God has already seen that. God has already seen that. And then let Him begin to really change it. Let's pray.

[31 : 54] Lord Jesus, we thank You for being so open and honest and frank. Even though that caused people to hate You.

But You came to this world not to please people. You came here to help us to see who we really are.

And to help us to see the only way we can really be saved. And we thank You for that even though it got You killed, Lord. Lord, we thank You for teaching us the truth. And we pray that You would just give us ears to hear it.

And help us to realize these truths in our lives. Help us to realize the state of our hearts. Help us to realize, Lord, how often we rely on the external but ignore what's going on inside.

And I pray for anyone here this morning or anyone listening to this whose heart is far from You. But they might not even know it. Help them to see that, Lord. And would You draw them to Yourself?

[32 : 59] Would You draw them to Your grace and Your love? Lord, You, Lord Jesus, You came to die for us to wipe away our sins and to give us new hearts.

And I pray for anyone who's still far from You. And the ways that we are all in some sense far from You. We are all in some sense still chasing after other things.

Lord, change our hearts. Because we can't. No matter what habits we put into place, we can't change our hearts. We pray that You would, Lord. Change our hearts. Give us what You promised.

There's new hearts that desire You and love You. And keep Your law not as a set of rules, but because we love You and we want to please You.

Give us those hearts. Make us those people, Lord. And we pray that promise over us. That promise in Your prophets to give us new hearts, Lord. Would You renew us.

[34 : 03] Give us a new steadfast spirit that is eager to obey You and loves You and serves You. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.