



"Grace, Legalism, and the Disciplined Life"

- Matthew 15:1-20

by **Pastor Tim Dodson**
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Matthew 15:1-20 Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, 2 "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." 3 He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? 4 "For God commanded, saying, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' 5 "But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, 'Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God' — 6 'then he need not honor his father or mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. 7 "Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 8 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. 9 And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" 10 When He had called the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear and understand: 11 "Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." 12 Then His disciples came and said to Him, "Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" 13 But He answered and said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14 "Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch." 15 Then Peter answered and said to Him, "Explain this parable to us." 16 So Jesus said, "Are you also still without understanding? 17 "Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? 18 "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. 19 "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. 20 "These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

While there are certainly many issues that divide the evangelical denominations, we can state categorically that one of the greatest and most distinct divisions that exist is the church that emphasizes the *outside* and the one that focuses on the *inside*. It seems that it is a rare meeting when these two elephants-in-the-room happen to find common ground, and even more so when they are able to worship together.

External religion cannot help but stress the outwardly visual and the physical manifest...the *actions* of one's belief system. Spirituality that is focused upon one's *internal* faith prioritizes the act of gospel regeneration through the work of Christ alone and becoming a new creature because of such.

External faith says that if a person were to keep their outside clean, then their inside would be clean also. Sort of like "spiritual osmosis." Such a church then invariably establishes a set of rules to govern the behavior of the members of that body, and then uses it as a standard to judge and police the spiritual condition of the individuals therein.

On the other side of this great divide lies the adherence to an internal faith. This theological position and worldview takes the stance wherein if the person is clean on the inside then he or she in response to such will keep the outside clean too. Internal faith strives to behave out of a heart of love for God and others and a Holy Spirit surrendered body and life. These folks take the position that a man is only, now and forever, changed from the inside-out *supernaturally* rather than outside-in *behaviorally*.

The practical and very real result of these lines of thinking often present rather extreme positions. One which inevitably leans toward extra-biblical man-made laws and works. It is there I become, by purpose or by burden, the standard for everyone else. Then on the other side, one can often find himself drowning in emotionalism and exercising the abuse of grace for license. When we have no outward quantifiable litmus tests in our life we can tend to slide into moral relativity and perhaps one day even spiritual apostasy...all the while crying out "*Grace! Grace!*"

Rarely if ever, are either of these positions static but rather surprisingly they tend to be highly fluid. Those with the rules keep adding more and more to cover everything, patch the leaks and 'hedge their bets.' And on the other side are the gracers ...without landmarks, who slide slowly but steadily toward liberalism, worldly permission, and physical freedoms. For the latter, the concepts of sanctification and holiness are therein stored away in a church closet somewhere, never to see the light of day again.

This is a battle that has been going on for a very long time. Is there an answer or do we just keep on shooting at each other?

Certainly the Jewish world *was not* and *is not* innocent of participation in all of this. Even by this time in history Judaism had already come up with thousands upon thousands of rules and regulations governing man's behavior, often to the most minute degree. These rules would eventually be written down and established as doctrine equal to that of the Old Testament scriptural law, and this collection became known as the "Talmud." The Talmud is a huge collection of doctrines and laws compiled and written by Jewish teachers by the 8th Century, A.D. Today there are whole segments of the Jewish world that are under these rules when half of the time they don't even know what all the rules are because there are simply too many of them.

Our text herein seeks to address one of these extremes; **the error of legalism**. Such is fitting, in that while both legalism and grace have their innate dangers, it is ultimately the legalist that can be far more insidious. For at least with the grace abusing apostate there is the chance that he or she will come to realize the reality of their state and come home. Such was the case with the prodigal son, who, upon realizing he was not where he belonged, eventually repented and returned. But how can one *return* if he thinks he is *already home*?

One section of these Jewish rules had to do with keeping oneself physically clean by washing with water. One aspect of those rules said that a person had to 'wash his hands before eating a meal.' The "hand-washing" that is being spoken of here is not about cleaning up before dinner as you did when you were a kid. This washing is *ceremonial* washing. Not an explicit direction from God, but merely a "tradition of religious man."

So the disciples apparently had been outed as having failed to wash their hands before eating at some point. In doing so they had broken the tradition of the church and essentially embarrassed the 'religiously uptight' of their day. These 'clean hands' people therefore marched on out to Jesus to give Him a piece of their minds. It would be great if we could believe that these Pharisees were actually desiring to know the truth herein. But one can quickly recognize the handprint of deceit when it comes to the these folks' interaction with Jesus.

It had to come to this. This is the inevitable "end-of-the-road" extremes in which legalism leads. One day it would essentially be the same reason for which they would kill Jesus. Oh, not over ceremonial dirty hands but over His ruffling the feathers of the staunchly arrogant and entrenched self-righteous legalist. How's that for irony? An entire generation today who thinks this 'Jesus thing' is so restrictive and they actually killed Him for being too liberal!

These boys wanted to know *why*. Not *what*, but *why*. Because you see, they weren't looking for truth or answers of any kind. They *possessed* the truth you see, so they just wanted to know why Jesus and His boys thought they didn't have to step up and fall in line. They operated under the presupposition that the way *they* lived and what *they* believed was *the truth*. But it was the truth *because* THEY believed it, they didn't necessarily believe it because it actually *was* the truth. Such is the heart of the legalist. Eyes and ears are really no longer necessary.

However, Jesus was never easily intimidated nor did he acquiesce in order to "get along." I guess He wasn't very "tolerant" ...at least in today's meaning of the word! Jesus fires back, "*Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your traditions?*" A lot of folks bristle when Jesus came out swinging in scripture. They want a nice Messiah. Don't upset anyone. Don't rock the boat. But Jesus clearly understood the playing field! He notoriously was gentle and patient (albeit straight-up) with the lost and the beaten down. But for those who knew better and kept the message of redemption wrapped up and away from the common man, well, for those Jesus had very little patience!

That's what was happening here...for the actions of the Pharisees were in affect denying people access to God. They were unilaterally declaring people "unclean." And for that, Jesus was going to get all up in their face. Today's "Pharisee-legalists" have been declaring people "unclean" for a long time. Not "fit" to be in God's presence. Not fit to be a part of their "club." Perhaps we should be a little more like Jesus in this matter. Jesus loves you and He proved it big time. And He spoke up when He needed to.

When Jesus felt the call to arms, it was the Word of God that He drew in order to do battle. In this biblical example, Jesus tells of a passage that directs us to "honor our fathers and mothers." Now we need to understand that as adults, and no longer in our parent's household, we are no longer under their authority as we were when we were children. But we *are* called to *honor* them. In this scenario, the principle that Jesus was driving home was the idea that one should do their level best to take care of their folks, especially as they age. But the people had found a way around such a directive. We can always dance around what's right if we try hard enough.

Apparently some folks devised a way to wiggle out of their responsibility on this matter by declaring that whatever finances or material care that should have been used for their folks would instead be given to "God." **Wow**...how very super-spiritual of them! But the damning facts lay in the fine print! For in truth the money was actually given for the temple operations, and such contribution was conveniently reserved until *after* the person died! So mom and pop were out in the cold because *you* had to do the church thing and take care of yourself well until you kicked off.

See, Jesus was quick to differentiate between *traditions* and *the directives of God*. This is still an issue today, and seldom do the participants in such legalistic rules ever check to see if this stuff is actually in the Bible and is God's directive or whether someone just made it up to control others or to 'be the man.' We see that some religious groups today have their women wear their heads covered by some little doily or something, and (one would think) if some guy were to wear his hair long he is taken out and stoned. They sight 1st Corinthians 11 on these matters, but do they really go and *read* it? Verse 2 and 16 clearly says that what Paul was teaching was *tradition* not **God's directives**, the nature of the times, not the **Word of Christ**, a *practice of the church* not a **command of our creator**. There are other such "we-have-always-done-it-this-way" issues that we do because of legalism and history, not because of Christ's directives.

Sighting Isaiah, Jesus says in verse 8 "*These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.*" And it is in that sentence that lay the heart of this whole passage, and the whole lesson! How quick we are to confess Jesus with our mouth...especially when politics and morality are in the discussion, but how slow we are to confess Him with our life in terms of grace given and mercy applied.

Now I grew up in a church that overtly dis'd alcohol use...never mind Jesus drank wine and actually *turned water into more wine after the party had been going on for awhile already*. We didn't dance, smoke, or chew, or 'go out with girls that do.' We never worked on Sunday in any form, never went to movie theatres and we men wore our hair short and God help you if you even *thought* about getting a tattoo or piercing! But being the quick boy that I was, all of this was not lost on me. For I couldn't find any of this in the bible, but I noticed alot of these guys who were preaching this "high road" were overweight, and I knew the Bible DID get after gluttony! (Prov 23:20-21, Phil 3:19, etc) The dean of my college once gave me the ultimatum of school or my long hair. It took me about the whole of 2 seconds to make that decision...

Jesus explained that it wasn't what went INTO a man that defiled him, but what came OUT. Now I don't believe that that passage is a license to drink too much or drink alcohol if you got a problem with such personally. Scripture has some to say about addictions. I don't think we are given permission to smoke two packs a day or live at Dairy Queen. But on the

other hand, I am astonished at what can come out of the mouths of people who are in a pew every Sunday "religiously." They would sooner spit on their mothers grave than crack open a cold beer on a hot day, but they will slander their neighbor, 'google gossip' and 'facebook flap' other Christians, and will just outright lie and destroy others because they were personally slighted at some point. But hey, they *look* good! Ya, well, God don't care what you look like or how much scripture you can quote if you don't actually live it out.

Now please don't label me a liberal or soft on righteousness! I very much believe in holiness and living above the fray of this fallen world. But I also know in my old age that unless that living comes from a Savior-Redeemer living inside me, it doesn't matter at all and I will just ultimately fail at it anyway. Because as Jesus said in John 15:5..."*without Him I can do nothing...*" I am a fan and a proponent of discipline and effort, work and saying no sometimes. But I had better be doing what God told us to do *corporately* or what He told me to do *personally* in Spirit, or it is just potential legalism and that don't look good on anyone and disrespects the cross and relegates the Holy Spirit to the back seat at best.

Jesus in Matthew 7 so beautifully lays out the prescription herein on this matter. And please note that He doesn't *dis'* holiness or works...in fact He declares they are a "tell" as to what a person is for sure. *"You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them."*

Then He goes on to say *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me..."*

Jesus says we need to seek and *do* His will, but if He doesn't actually *know* us, we can be the nicest guy on the block and we are still lost. Those who try to operate with a "heart far from Him" are "worshipping in vain." In other words, they're just "going through the motions." It's all empty. So how do I know how to operate here? What is the practical guide? Well, 1 Corinthians 10:31 has always been a good place to hang your hat: *"So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."*

Now all of this is easier said than done. People are not going to like the way you live if you live like that. The disciples were worried that Jesus had offended someone. Which was a genuine concern because Jesus DID offend them and from where I sit it is clear He actually *meant* to offend them! What about us? The 'hardcore-rule-zealot' will be 'dising' you on one side and will accuse you of not being saved, and the 'pop-culture' church of 2016 will say you are intolerant, mean, judgmental, works oriented, and 'holier-than-thou.' But Jesus made it clear on more than one occasion that with man...*worldly man*, you just can't win.

So what is our recourse? How should we handle them? We don't. Jesus clearly tells us that the Father will deal with them. We would love to fight and argue because we get pumped up about this stuff but that is not the direction we are given here. Jesus says that if these folks are not His...if they are not "of the fold," or if they are in the wrong, then God will do some "uprooting." And certainly we have seen evidence of this reality time and time again around here. *Point blank* we are instructed to "leave them alone." They are "blind guides" so they aren't apt to get very far.

Here is our instruction: Romans 14:3-8 *Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. **Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.***