

## Chapter 59: The Anatomy of Legalism

*Matthew 15:1–9*

As Jesus' profile continues to rise, religious leaders come to him in Galilee from Jerusalem. They do not come to learn from this rabbi, but to confront him. Of course, these leaders cannot charge Jesus with any fault concerning the law of God recorded in the Scriptures. Instead, they must condemn him according to the traditions of the elders. How, though, does their tradition (in this case, about hand-washing) relate to the law of God? As Jesus explains, their concerns reveal that their hearts are steeped in legalism. Here, Jesus shows how *legalism looks for loopholes and creates counterfeit commandments*.

### Counterfeit Commandments (Matt. 15:1–2)

At the end of Matthew 14, Jesus had been ministering to the sick in Galilee at Genessaret, healing all who touched the fringe of his garment (Matt. 14:34–36). Although Matthew does not clearly tell us how much time passed between that ministry and what we read now, we get the impression that Jesus is still in the same place when the Pharisees and scribes come to Jesus from Jerusalem (v. 1). Within the Gospel of Matthew, this is the very first time Jesus encounters religious leaders from Jerusalem at all.<sup>1</sup> The meeting, however, is not a happy occasion. As Leon Morris observes, “It was not that they were paying a pastoral visit to Galilee and happened to come across Jesus; it seems that they had come expressly to confront him.”<sup>2</sup> The length of the trip from Jerusalem in the south, to Genessaret in the north, underscores the seriousness of their visit. Again, we are seeing Jesus increase in notoriety in ways that draw people to him to seek his ministry (Matt. 14:13, 35) and, as here, to oppose him.

Of all the topics that might prompt religious leaders to travel so far in the modern world, ritual hand-washing would not rank very highly for us. Nevertheless, this was the topic that these Pharisees and scribes wished to press: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat” (v. 2). Importantly, Matthew will explore the connection between ceremonial and spiritual purity not only in this passage, but much more in the next passage when he addresses the ceremonial cleanness of food (vv. 10–20).<sup>3</sup> For the Pharisees and scribes, eating represented a significant moment where someone might contract spiritual defilement if done in the wrong way. In the next section, Jesus will address whether the food itself can truly defile someone. Here, the topic surrounds the ceremonial hand-washing that did not worry so much about germs as about ritual pollutions and defilements. The logic was simple: what your body eats

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<sup>1</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 578.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 389.

<sup>3</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 584.

has the potential to defile your soul. Therefore, it was considered essential to eat properly—the right food, in the right way.

Now, the old covenant law certainly did contain ritual requirements concerning the food that God’s people could eat. When Jesus shifts the emphasis away from what goes *into* the mouth to what comes *out of* the mouth in the next section, he will be making a decisive change in the law—not to abolish the law, but to bring old covenant food laws to their complete fulfillment in him. Regarding hand-washing, however, it is important to recognize that the Pharisees and scribes were demanding of Jesus something that the old covenant law never required. Rather, the “tradition of the elders” represented an extrapolation of laws concerning how priests should minister in the temple that were then applied analogously to ordinary meals for all Israelites: “The Pharisees in this instance had taken the commandment to priests concerning the washing of hands (and feet) before performing their temple duties (cf. Exod 30:17–21; for hand-washing as a protection against ritual impurity, cf. Lev 15:11) and had applied it to all Jews in the blessing preceding the eating of meals (See *m. Ber.* 8:2–4; *γ. Šabb.* 1.3d; cf. Mark 7:3–4).”<sup>4</sup> So, while Jesus and his disciples obeyed the food laws that were actually set down in the Scriptures, Jesus taught his disciples to disregard these additional rules that were enjoined by the religious leaders.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus’ reasoning seems to arise from three basic principles. First, the law of God required infinitely far more than the religious leaders imagined, to demand a perfect righteousness—as perfect as God himself (Matt. 5:17–20, 48). So, while the Pharisees claimed concern for ritual purity, they insisted upon a practice that could not actually actualize that purity: “no end or limit could be set to such cautions; for they could scarcely move a finger without contracting some new spot or stain.”<sup>6</sup> Second, Jesus therefore recognized that the Pharisees and scribes were not pursuing the perfect righteousness that God had appointed, but were constructing an alternative system of righteousness that was easier to keep (Matt. 5:21–47). Legalism looks for loopholes, and here the Pharisees were treating ritual washings directed at the physical defilements of the hands as a loophole to avoid dealing with the weightier matters of the law directed at the spiritual defilements of the heart. Third, as we will see in the next section, Jesus will demonstrate that the traditions of the elders do not merely add to the law; ultimately these teachings undercut and overturn the law.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in this passage, Jesus deals directly with *legalism*. That is, the Pharisees and scribes believe that one’s spiritual state is defined by the extent of their obedience to a law. Since the perfect righteousness demanded by God’s actual law is impossible for anyone to keep, these religious leaders have constructed an alternative law that they believe would be possible to keep. It is far easier to

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<sup>4</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 430.

<sup>5</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 582–83.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:249.

<sup>7</sup> “There was a vast mass of opinions and decisions that had been handed down from the past. This ‘tradition of the elders’ was regarded as being equally binding as God’s law itself, since, according to the scribes and their followers, they showed what the divine law really meant, that is, how it should be applied to everyday life. The trouble was however that in many cases—not in all; otherwise Jesus could not have spoken the words recorded in 23:2, 3a—these judgments *a.* went far beyond anything demanded by God’s law, or *b.* failed entirely to do justice to the real requirements of that law. For *b.* see on 5:20–48. For *a.*, on 12:1–8. Generally *a.* and *b.* combine.” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 608.)

wash one’s hands than to cleanse the heart from “evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matt. 15:19)! Then, since they believe that they will be saved on the basis of this (alternative) law, they demand slavish obedience to it: “Sternly, and therefore tyrannically, are the common people compelled to give their whole attention to trifles.”<sup>8</sup>

### Looking for Loopholes (Matt. 15:3–6)

Jesus’ response exactly mirrors the question of the scribes and the Pharisees. In both questions, “why” translates the specific phrase, *Διὰ τί* (*dia ti*). This was a “standard rabbinic technique” of replying “directly with a counter question.”<sup>9</sup> In this counter question, we should make four observations. First, Jesus does not engage in the “whataboutism” that is so prevalent in our society. That is, Jesus is not trying to distract the scribes and Pharisees from his own sins by pointing to other, similar sins that they have committed. Rather, he is at once arguing that the traditions they demand actually oppose the commandment of God. Therefore, second, Jesus does not concede that this tradition is neutral, much less helpful. Or, as Morris puts it, “Jesus is not saying, ‘Despite your tradition you break the law of God.’ He is saying, ‘Because of your tradition you break the law of God.’”<sup>10</sup> Third, by pitting the traditions against the commandment of God, Jesus is arguing that the religious leaders have treated their tradition as “of higher value than one of the most important of the commandments of God.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, fourth, by showing the elevation of tradition over God’s commandment, Jesus is offering a defense that not only permits his disciples to neglect washing their hands, but actually requires them to avoid this traditional hand-washing.<sup>12</sup>

In vv. 4–6, Jesus explains his initial charge. In these verses, we should note the stark contrast between what *God* commanded (v. 4) and what *they* have said (v. 5).<sup>13</sup> In this case, Jesus quotes the Fifth Commandment of a requirement to honor father and mother. Against this, the Pharisees and scribes had found another legalistic loophole, in which they claim that someone might neglect the needs of their parents if they had already given something to God. It is unlikely that this practice was considered justifiable to allow people to spite their parents deliberately. Instead, it is more likely that by giving something to God, people could expect greater praise from others than by quietly meeting the needs of elderly parents (see Matt. 6:1–4).<sup>14</sup> As in Jesus’ extensive teaching on the perfect requirements of God’s righteous law in Matthew 5, Jesus is showing the Pharisees and scribes one more example of how “for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God” (v. 6). Again, these traditions have not formed a helpful hedge around the law, and neither are these traditions merely neutral. Instead, these traditions have developed in order to create a loophole to justify behavior that ran clearly contrary to God’s explicit commandment.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:246.

<sup>9</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 238; see also Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 429–30.

<sup>10</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 391.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:251.

<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 583.

<sup>13</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 579.

<sup>14</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 613.

## The Root of Legalism (Matt. 15:7–9)

Jesus continues his rebuke of the Pharisees and scribes by calling them “hypocrites” (v. 7). Hendriksen explains the nature of the charge well: “Now when people are corrupt enough to teach the younger generation how to evade the requirements of a very important commandment of the Decalogue, and are doing this while pretending to be very pious and devout, they deserve to be called *hypocrites*.”<sup>15</sup> Still, Jesus gives a more thorough definition of their hypocrisy when he quotes from Isaiah 29:13. This is a very important passage, because in these verses Jesus gives a basic anatomy of the parts that make up legalism and hypocrisy.

First, Jesus quotes the Lord’s condemnation of the people who “honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me” (v. 8). In this verse, the Lord observes that his people “relied on outward ceremonies alone, and set no value on true holiness, which consists in sincere uprightness of heart.”<sup>16</sup> As we observed earlier, this is connected to Jesus’ insistence that legalism looks for loopholes that help them to set aside the full weight of the demands of God’s perfect, righteous law. By this, legalists “have displaced the true religion of the heart (v.8), of the entire personality and will, with a religion of form.”<sup>17</sup> Yes, God had commanded several outward, formal rituals under the old covenant, and he still prescribes certain outward forms that we use today in the church (e.g., baptism and the Lord’s Supper). Nevertheless, even in the old covenant God wanted more than our outward, formal obedience. God wanted perfect righteousness from us, from our bodies as well as our souls. So, to set up the external law as an end in itself has an appearance of godliness, but it entirely misses God himself.

Second, Jesus again quotes: “in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (v. 9). Here, it is not only God’s honor that is a pretense, but also these “teachings that are likewise empty pretense (presented as being divine when they are framed only by men).”<sup>18</sup> Since legalism shifts the goal of righteousness away from God’s perfect righteousness and onto external, formal rituals, legalism tends to develop its teachings into an extensive system. This is why many people characterize legalism as creating rules that go beyond God’s law; however, it is important to understand *how* and *why* legalism goes beyond God’s law. Indeed, Jesus’ exposition of the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount gives applications of the law that go beyond exactly what is written in the law, but he is not being legalistic. Instead, he is exposing the full implications of the law. Legalism, on the other hand, starts by a heart that wanders from God’s perfect righteousness and instead seeks to please God by an alternative law made up from “the commandments of men.” Thus, legalism does go beyond God’s law, but (1) it is working from an entirely different basis than the law, and (2) its doctrines ultimately undercut the pure teaching of the law that Christ exemplifies. Then, as Calvin observes, “This is followed by the slow growth of tyranny; for, when men have once assumed to themselves the right to issue commands, they demand a rigid adherence to their laws, and do not allow the smallest iota to be left out, either through contempt or through forgetfulness.”<sup>19</sup>

As Lenski writes, pretense in the honor we give to God and pretense in human teachings “are

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<sup>15</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 614.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:252.

<sup>17</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 399.

<sup>18</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 587.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:246.

always found together, for the moment the heart keeps far from God it leaves also his Word. The very first requirement of his Word which is also fundamental for all true worship of God is genuine sincerity toward him and his Word.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, legalism is not an over-emphasis on God’s word, but a tyrannical demand for obedience to a grotesque caricature of God’s word.

## Discussion Questions

1. Where did the Pharisees and scribes come from (v. 1)? How far did they travel to get to Jesus? Why did they come to Jesus? Why were they so concerned about hand-washing before eating? What kinds of modern equivalents might we think through to relate to their concern? What did the Old Testament law say about this ritual of hand-washing? What role were they assigning to the traditions of the elders?
2. How does Jesus respond with his own counter-charge (v. 3)? What role does Jesus assign to God’s commandment (v. 3, 4)? What role does Jesus assign to the tradition of the elders (v. 5)? What is Jesus saying should be the relationship between God’s commandments and human tradition? How does this passage compare to Jesus teaching in Matthew 5? Why does legalism look for loopholes in God’s law?
3. What is a hypocrite? Why does Jesus call the Pharisees and scribes “hypocrites”? What is the root of legalism (v. 8b)? What is the fruit of legalism (v. 9b)? How does a heart far from God eventually lead to tyrannical, man-made commandments? Why does legalistic worship necessarily render our worship into vanity? How does Jesus’ teaching here fill out the way that we sometimes talk about legalism in Christianity today?
4. Where do you recognize legalism in your life? Where does your heart stray from loving God toward seeking after something else? How have you sought to get out from under the infinitely-high-as-heaven righteousness demanded by God? What loopholes in God’s holy commandments have you created for yourself? How have these loopholes led to a system of commandments of your own creation? What is the solution?

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<sup>20</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 587.