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Lake Cities Community Church
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Series: On Your Mark!

“The Problems of the Pharisees”

Mark 7: 1-23

What comes to mind when you heard the word “Pharisee” or “Pharisaical”? If you have any background in the New Testament I would guess the connotations are not positive. The Pharisees are the religious leaders we love to hate. Their hypocrisy and pride are notorious. They are the enemies of Christ and when they pop up in our Bible reading we hold out our hand and say: “Dear Lord, I thank Thee that I am not like those sinners (ref: Luke 18:11). My hands are clean and my heart is pure. Amen.” We do this because we assume that our alignment is with the followers of Christ, and not the enemies of Christ. But didn't the Pharisees also see themselves as God's most devout followers? I want to challenge us this morning to look at the Pharisees with fresh eyes and to set aside our assumptions.

Who were the Pharisees? At the time of Jesus there were an estimated 6,000 Pharisees. Their group began during the 2nd century B.C. as the Greek culture began to spread throughout the world (that time between the Old and New Testaments). The name “Pharisee” means, “separated ones” - because they desired to separate themselves from sin - and to live holy lives. They were sold out to radical obedience of the Law of Moses. Israel had been punished, and punished, and punished again for not obeying the law and they said, “No more! We will obey, O Lord. Though no one else - We will be faithful to you!” The Pharisees became experts in the 613 commands of the Law of Moses: Jewish historian

Josephus wrote: “The Pharisees are those who are esteemed most skillful in the exact explication of their laws. War 2:162 (2.8.14.162).”

So, if you desire to be a sold-out Christian known for radical obedience. If you have committed to follow Christ no matter the cost – then you have much in common with the Pharisees – in emulating their devotion and perhaps in falling into their sins. Turn with me now to Mark chapter seven, we will be in verses 1-23. As you turn there let me briefly give you two examples of the Law of Moses, which were important to the Pharisees and important to our passage.

First, I would like for you to recall there were both clean and unclean animals.

In Deut. 14 you may recall that clean animals included the ox, the sheep, goat, deer, gazelle, wild goat, antelope, mountain sheep, anything from the water with fins and scales. On the other hand, unclean animals included the camel, rabbit, rock-badger, pig, any water creature that does not have fins or scales. In terms of birds, the eagle, vulture, buzzard, red kite, raven, ostrich, owl, sea gull and hawk were unclean. The law was clear, “**You shall not eat any of their flesh no touch their carcasses – they are unclean to you**” (Deut 14:8,19). The Pharisees knew this and obeyed these laws to the scale and feather.

A second series of laws required ritual bathing and washing. For example, Lev. 17:15 “**And when any person eats an animal which dies, or is torn by beasts, whether he is a native or an alien, he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; then he will become clean.**” In addition, after a sacrifice you had to bathe in water. Before you receive an offering, before going into the temple, after a sickness, after any type

of bodily discharge – bathe in water. To be clean before God meant spending time with Mr. Bubbles. The phrase “cleanliness is next to godliness” come from these types of laws.

1) They Made Stuff Up (Legalism)

So now in Mark 7, the Pharisees have come up once again from Jerusalem to the region of Galilee to keep tabs on Christ, and they don't like what they see. Verse 2: “(The Pharisees) had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves...” (2-4) And after more explanation, the Pharisees ask Jesus in verse five, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?” (5). And Jesus rebukes them saying, “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me, but in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men. Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men. He was also saying to them. “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition” (6-9). They were also apparently experts at setting aside their money, for in verses 10-13, Jesus exposes their hypocrisy using a concept called “corban” (dedicated to the Lord), to tie up their money as an excuse not to care for the elderly parents – they were using God as an excuse not to obey God! Verse 13, “thus invalidating the word of God, by your tradition which you have handed down, and you do many things such as that.”

So the Pharisees, who began as devoted followers of God went wrong. How? What happened? **To put it simply, “They made stuff up.”** They discovered that God’s law did not pertain to every area of life – and so they made up new laws and traditions. Someone said “You know we have to bathe if we touch a dead animal or before we sacrifice, shouldn’t we have to wash our hands before lunch?” And they agreed and made it a rule for everyone to follow. Josephus writes (Antiq. 13:297, 13.10.6.297): “What I would now explain is this, that the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses.”

Today we call this legalism. Here is my definition: **“Legalism promises holiness by following man-made rules which govern gray areas of culture or theology.”** One of my professors in seminary, Dr. Harold Hoehner would tell us that when it comes to legalism - remember *the problem is not the rules, but the attitude about the rules.* If you want to wash your hands before lunch – great! But don’t judge others as lesser spiritual than you if they don’t. I met a woman in my first year of seminary who had just bought her first pair of blue jeans. The church she grew up in taught that the modest woman; the women who really loved the Lord – would only wear long skirts or dresses. Now is there anything wrong about wearing dresses and long skirts? Not at all! But as soon as they made that the standard for holiness for everyone – they fell into legalism. The Pharisees lost the blessing of God because they became legalists – teaching as God’s doctrine – the precepts of men.

2) Jesus Brought Increased Freedom

Let's continue in our text: [Mark 7:18](#) And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; [Mark 7:19](#) because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated? "(Thus He declared all foods clean.) [Mark 7:20](#) And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. [Mark 7:21](#) "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, [Mark 7:22](#) deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. Notice that Jesus has moved out of the realm of man-made rules and into discussion about the law itself – specifically about what a person could eat – those clean and unclean animals. Jesus is teaching that our relationships with the law has changed. The coming of Jesus Christ brought greater freedom. That list of clean and unclean animals no longer applies to the Christian. True cleanliness or corruption is internal – in the heart of each person.

I heard a pastor once stand in front of a church once and proudly proclaim that he had never eaten shrimp, because it was considered unclean in the Old Testament (and therefore there was some lingering value to avoiding the little creature). "No!" If you don't like shrimp because they are just gross and taste terrible – fine – but do not raise it any longer as a biblical issue. Christ died so that you and I could eat at Red Lobster for lunch today without guilt! With Christ comes greater freedom. You may not be aware of a movement in Christianity called the Reconstructionist Movement based in Tyler, Texas that seeks to re-establish the Law of Moses with its ceremonial and dietary restrictions as the

law of the land in the USA. I disagree with their theology and believe it very close to being a false teaching. When we look at the problem of the Pharisee – it was two fold. First, they fell into legalism and set up rules in gray areas and expected everyone else to follow them. Second, they were not able to grasp that with the coming of Christ our freedom increased. We moved from law to grace. The law was a great blessing in its time, but times changed with the coming of Jesus.

Application: The question for us therefore becomes; *How do you emulate the strong devotion to God, that the Pharisees had, but not fall into legalism and pride?* One step is to be self-aware at what the issues are that we may be prone to be legalistic about. For the Pharisees it was hand washing. At the church in Rome it was drinking, eating and what days to celebrate (Romans 14-15). What is it for LCCC? I've listed on the back of the card in your bulletin some of the possible gray area issues:

Areas of Potential Legalism

- Use of Alcohol
- Use of tobacco products
- Participating in dancing
- Any type of gambling
- Celebrating secular holidays (Halloween)
- Reading certain books (Harry Potter, Twilight)
- Role of women in the church
- Watching certain movies
- Political party affiliation
- Listening to rock music
- Schooling options (home / public / private)
- Child discipline (spank / not spank, etc.)
- Different parenting philosophies
- Worship style: traditional / contemporary
- Church governance options
- Young or old earth beliefs
- Existence of sign-gifts (healing, tongues)
- Requirement of "tithing" vs. grace giving
- Sequence of "end-times" events
- Beliefs about divorce / remarriage
- Lordship salvation
- Different theological systems
- Use of money / standards of living
- Working on Sunday

Potential Area @ LCCC:

This is part of the list I used in my Master's thesis when I studied the negative impact that legalism can have. What I want you to do is to think about what are potential issues at LCCC? Read through the list – or it may be an issue not on the list – then write it down on the other side, fold the note and put it in the offering place. When Micah leads us to the Lord's Table, he is going to read some of them – so that we might reflect and ask God to be merciful to us – to have the zeal of the Pharisees, but the love and acceptance of Christ. As you work on that, I would like to conclude with this quote from Allen Ross, former Professor of Old Testament, Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry:

“It seems to me that modern conservative Christians share many of the fine qualities of the Pharisees. Had they lived in that generation, they would have found their greatest agreement with them; they would not have belonged to the other groups. Like the Pharisees they are devout believers who seek to preserve the faith that they have received. They have a great desire to do the will of God, and among their many teachings, tithing and remaining pure receive much attention.

But they most easily exhibit the excesses and errors of Pharisaism as well. Perhaps this is simply the lot of those in any age who believe that they have the truth. They often ascribe a great deal of authority to the teachings they receive on the Bible, even to the point of elevating application to the level of interpretation (legalism), so that those who do not comply with the Word of God as they understand may be considered disobedient. Unfortunately, the self-righteous and hypocritical attitude of the Pharisees is alive and well today in our churches.” – Allen Ross (bible.org)