

March 27, 2011

Dirty Rotten Hypocrites

Mark 7:1-13

INTRODUCTION

“I can’t believe in Christianity—there’s so many hypocrites in the church!” How many times have we heard this objection! Well, this is not a new objection because, according to the Bible, it is not exactly a new problem. If Christianity is true, then one of the main things that we can expect from all human beings is hypocrisy: and much more so about the highest things. But what is hypocrisy really? The word comes from the drama of the Greeks. A ‘hypocrite’ was one who wore a mask on stage, an actor. It comes from two Greek words—the preposition ‘under’ (*hypo*) and the action of sifting or deciding (*krinein*) or judging (*krise*) or criticizing (*kritike*)—so we can see how the word took on its eventual meaning. The actor was not simply hiding under a mask, but was getting “under the text” of the playwright, less concerned with matching up his external performance to the information of the author.

- A HYPOCRITE’S VIEW
- A HYPOCRITE’S DOCTRINE
- A HYPOCRITE’S PRACTICE

The Big Idea is that hypocrisy is making much in the outer life of what is not true in the heart.

So our big idea is the definition of hypocrisy. But please do not hear in this a dissection of everyone else’s problem but your own. Let’s all take this to our own hearts.

DOCTRINE

I. A HYPOCRITE’S VIEW

A) Hypocrisy Cannot Help Spying Out Freedom {1-2}

1. Those words I take from Paul when he had a similar problem to fix in Jerusalem; and he explained it to the Galatian church so that they could understand what was happening to

them: “Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in **to spy out** our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, **so that** they might bring us into slavery” [Gal. 2:4]. Now the same thing is happening here, as the establishment of Jerusalem swarms to Jesus and his disciples: *Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem (1)*. The word for “gathered” (*synagontai*) is the verb form for synagogue—the place of learning the Scriptures—so Mark wants to stress that it was Jesus who was about to put them back in elementary school.

2. And what did the Pharisees discover when they arrived? *they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed (2)*. “Defiled” here is also literally ‘common’ (*koinais*), just as it is in the lesson that Peter had to learn of the rooftop in Acts 10: “What God has made clean, do not call common” [v. 15]. But the idea in the Pharisees’ mind is that the Jewish hands had to become uncommon before eating.

B) Hypocrisy Cannot Help Being Paranoid {3-5}

1. *(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders—now lest we think that this is some private ‘OCD’ personality, we are told that this is not just the Pharisees but “all the Jews,” so that this kind of lifestyle is contagious. And the word “holding” (kratountes) is from the same word as a governmental kind of rule (kratein). The verb krateo can mean to grasp, keep, master, have power over, or lay hold of, but its use here is clearly seen as something where obsession leads to oppression.*

2. He adds to this parenthesis that *when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches (4)*. At the marketplace there may be Gentiles. According to the traditions, rubbing up against a Gentile made you unclean; and since you could never be too sure, it was better to be safe than sorry. If the shadow of a Gentile passed over your plate or the spot where you ate it was unclean again.

3. *And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” (5)* I know we joke about paranoia a lot, but the truth of the matter is that it is an unhealthy weakness in a person. It is a characteristic of a person who has turned radically inward. The heights of it can be found in the asylum, but really anyone who cannot get their mind off of all of the evil intents of others (real or imagined) has lost their love and wonder of God’s reality. Everything is a problem, everything is a conspiracy, everyone is out to get them, every glass is half-empty, every

movement is a fire for them to put out. And while Paul tells Titus that such people may need help, they shouldn't be teaching: "To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled" [Ti. 1:15]. That's why these Pharisees walked up and the first thing they saw was defiled hands. They were looking through defiled eyes. It's like rose-colored glasses. Except instead of rose-color, this is more like those black lamps used by CSI units to detect fingerprints in a criminal investigation. Now if someone walked into one of our Shepherds College classes and the interrupted because the first thing they see is me with a Dutch Brothers coffee stain and someone else eating a bag of Cheetos at 6:30 in the morning getting orange Cheeto residue all over their copy of the *Institutes*, we may have to love that OCD brother, but we can't keep letting him block the flow of God's kingdom. That is what R. C. Sproul once called the "tyranny of the weaker brother," and according to the Bible the weak brother slowing things down the most is the legalist. The rest of what Jesus says explains why.

II. A HYPOCRITE'S DOCTRINE

A) A Tale of Two Doctrines: Invisible versus Visible {6-7a}

1. Jesus is very helpful here in addressing the hypocrites by name: **You hypocrites!** And then he cites Isaiah 29:13 where God is judging Jerusalem for despising the knowledge of God; and the way He judges them is to remove more knowledge from them. Jesus isn't just proof-texting: He is claiming that Isaiah is talking about them. In effect He is saying, 'Guys, when you want a textbook definition of hypocrisy you can go to Isaiah, and he will be holding up a mirror with your face in it!' So, *he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me'"* (6). So the first thing we can say about the essence of hypocrisy is that what's moving on the outside isn't what's moving on the inside: what you see is *not* what you get. But God has a different viewpoint. He tells Samuel: "For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" [1 Sam. 16:7]. We all know the expression **lip-service**. What do we mean by it? The mouth is moving alright, but it doesn't tell the truth about what is on the inside.

2. He adds, *in vain do they worship me* (7a). Now that is an offensive idea today! "The nerve of anyone to say that there is a true worship and a false worship. Worship is worship—as long as someone's heart is in the right place!" Ah—but isn't that the very question we are asking here? According to Jesus not everyone's heart *is* in the right place even though what you can see might look like it. So if we want to get deeper, it isn't just lips that lie, but also *any*

outward activity. King Saul wanted to fight for God, but the prophet hadn't shown up for the sacrifice. No matter. God called for a sacrifice, so add a war in God's name to a sacrifice that God commanded and two out of three ain't bad, right? And yet Samuel corrected him:

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams [1 Sam. 15:22].

Obedience versus sacrifice...obedience versus sacrifice—so not *this* external act, but *that* one? Wrong! Obedience is first and foremost a matter of the heart. It is an invisible act of the soul discovering and treasuring and pursuing an invisible attribute of God, regardless of what it looks like on the outside (and it will always look different between one person and another on the outside). The heart of obedience is something no man can see. This is **spiritual obedience**. It is not that God does not want your lips and your hands to be moving for him, but if they are not moved by the majesty of God, seen and savored by the heart (both of which are invisible), it is a lie! At the end of the day, what you will be moved by and moving toward is something about man that you can see and handle and control.

B) A Tale of Two Doctrines: God's versus Man's {7b-8}

1. Can we say anything else about this vain, lip-service, outward-behavior-driven doctrine? Jesus adds that it is *teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.* 'You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.' And that may be the most easy-to-miss aspect of this whole hypocrisy thing. What makes a doctrine a 'doctrine of man' is that the doctrine is about man, in the sense that it exalts man, commends to you man, solves your problem with a man, and obsesses over the movements of man. If the focus of your life and your speech to others begins and ends with what anybody less than Jesus is **doing**, then what do you think people's standard of holiness will be? What do you think people will think the good news is? YOU—or whoever the man is that you hold over yourself. In Isaiah it literally ends by saying, "and **their fear** of me is a commandment taught by men" [29:13]. In other words, your fear that is supposed to be in God is transferred down to the level of the person who is really commanding your movements. So, to say it all another way, this doctrine of man is really just a man telling you to be more like himself, or more like what he thinks you should be. And that means that you are man's slave and not God's. But Paul says, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" [Gal. 5:1].

2. Now some people in the modern church think that this is one of those versus that justifies their hatred of doctrine. So they say, ‘Look here—we are not to succumb to the doctrines or teachings of man, but only the voice of God.’ Well let’s look at that closely. Notice that the word “doctrine” is used here in a neutral or hypothetical sense, in that Jesus says “You teach *as* doctrines—” something bad. In other words, there are two alternatives that one can teach *as* doctrines here: one is the commands of God, the other is the traditions of man. Either way, it will be our doctrine. We will either have right doctrine or wrong doctrine, but we will not have no doctrine at all. That is to force into Jesus’ mouth the Gnostic anti-intellectual superstitions of our day.

III. A HYPOCRITE’S PRACTICE

A) A ‘Fine Way’ of Setting Yourself Above God {9-10}

1. It should be clear that this ‘complement’ is sarcasm by Jesus and not admiration: *And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! (9).* Notice how the hypocrite’s doctrine flows directly out into his practice. He substitutes the commands of man over the commandments of God, so naturally he is going to prefer and commend the commands of man over the commandments of God. In doing so, he **establishes** a tradition. And tradition is hard to break. For some of us, we mistake tradition for “the way it’s always been,” and so it goes unquestioned. It is deep-rooted and so it looks foundational to everything else. It’s the norm. And if you can normalize the abnormal, well, there’s nothing more fine and clever than that. To make something down here, something that’s changeable, seem like the eternal thing, the real thing is really the ultimate optical illusion. But it’s a “fine way” of turning reality upside down because it plays to a deep-seated desire for order and efficiency: Give me practical principles; give me a list; give me something tangible; a character example; a tradition of stability—give me something I can sink my teeth into, something to do. It’s a fine way to reject God. Just like the Roman Catholic Church in claiming to be the originator of Scripture sets themselves above Scripture, so the man who holds himself out as the reference point for obedience sets himself above the God to whom we are obligated. It is a fine way—it is a subtle way—to lift ourselves above God in people’s attention span.

2. So if Jesus is going to get behind it, He needs to go to his own Word to where He first spoke the Law: *For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die’ (10).* Now what is He saying here? He quotes from the Law—Exodus 20:12 and 21:17 to be exact—in order to show that for the Pharisees to uphold one

interpretation of the Law they would have to break another portion of the Law, and in so doing are actually subject to the death penalty. Imagine the beads of sweat forming in their religious hoodies at this point! But there is a broader principle here, because Jesus had already made it clear that this is not an isolated incident. This was a misunderstanding and misapplication of the whole Law of God. In other words this was not a contest of ‘My favorite part of the Law’ is higher up the pyramid than ‘your favorite part of the Law.’ Rather Jesus was exposing that when you see in the Law a means of keeping God appeased by your performance, you do not know God or love him in the heart. The Pharisees tried to uphold the Law by sealing up loopholes with their traditions (which is fairly insulting to God because it assumes that He forgot something or that you have a higher standard of holiness than He does!)—and when we see in the letter of the Law the outer shell of our performance we will be forced to violate other portions of the Law quicker than we think. How that plays out in the case Jesus brings up is made plainer in the last three verses.

B) A ‘Fine Way’ of Prohibiting and Making Void {11-13}

1. *But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban’ (that is, given to God)*—Now understand two things here: First, by the words **you say**, Jesus is giving an example of one of these “commands of man,” so that we should understand this as “You Command” or “You Demand of others.” Second, the word ‘Corban’ is another one of those local words that Mark uses and explains for his Roman audience to continue to establish his eyewitness vantage point. It doesn’t simply mean ‘gift’ as in a birthday party. It is a religious offering or vow. In other words, this is not the Pharisees whispering things that people could get away with so that they could excuse not helping out their parents. This was made part of the Law since lawful and unlawful oaths to God were serious. So let’s continue and see what is at stake for Jesus: *then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother (12)*. Because of this, you are restricting him from obedience.

2. There’s the centerpiece. This may be one of the most obscure important teachings in the whole Bible. I don’t know what else to call it. It is a huge theme in Paul’s letter to the Galatians; but in my experience, people who aren’t really bothered by being **held back** in God’s kingdom don’t really have any categories for it. Typically, when we hear the Bible speak against legalism we usually only have one column, when Jesus and the biblical authors have two. We usually only see the Bible’s condemnation of legalism coming to the aid of those in despair. So we read Galatians or Jesus’ showdowns with the Pharisees and we think, “Yep, legalism bad; legalism offensive to God; legalism is self-justification; legalism is a false

gospel; legalism is my sinful, prideful tendency—in other words, legalism not nice!” All true. But the biblical authors have another column in addition. Let’s hear it from Jesus first and then we will unpack it one more time: *then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother (12)*. You do not permit him to DO! Your obsession with externals and timetables and uniformity makes people disobey God—keeps people in disobedience and inaction. *You* are making excuses for inaction. *You* are the enemy of obedience. Your little obedience in the letter is preventing, stopping, resisting, and afraid of real obedience in the true spirit of the Law. Legalism isn’t just the opposite error of license—in a very real sense, *legalism is license!* It is license to do nothing but focus on what is easy and manageable for you. But Jesus was never more irate than with those who thought this way,

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the **weightier matters of the law**: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! [Mat. 23:23-24]

Notice that the ‘weightier matters’ of the Law are attributes of God, and that sinner’s favorite matters are pieces of creation that they can slice up, wrap up and take home with them as a trophy. Jesus wasn’t pitting one part of the Law against another. The hypocrite is. The hypocrite is making much in the outer life of what is not true in the heart.

APPLICATION

To the Skeptic – A new book claims that hypocrisy (it also calls it ‘self-deception’) is a valuable evolutionary tool that we shouldn’t feel so bad about after all. But here’s the thing: You don’t actually believe that—you *can’t* believe that! We cannot live our lives to the end being somebody different on the outside than we are on the inside. For one thing it will lead to **alienation**: from yourself and from others. It also ignores that the basic motives for hypocrisy—fear, manipulation, craving for approval—occur because we perceive ourselves to be enslaved by others or by circumstances. Hypocrisy is our time-honored way out of the person we don’t want to be. We fake it enough to fly under people’s radar screen. We check the boxes that people can see and that really important people are demanding. But then we have to live all day and be alone at night with the person who bears no resemblance to the person who we’re constructing out there. Now I am not offering this as *the* reason you should hate the hypocrisy in your heart—only that the existence of hypocrisy is a serious problem for a non-Christian worldview.

To the Saint – Let me be as clear as I can be that *this tyrannical hypocrisy is our nature if left to itself!* Any of us can participate in it (and probably have from time to time). What we do is we take the thing that we have been blessed with or that we are talented at, and we begin to make an inordinate amount of noise about *our part* in that thing. So, let me use myself as an example. God has blessed me with a love of learning and has given me the opportunity over the past few years to share that with others. If I am not very deliberate about focusing on the object of the teaching—namely Christ—instead of my ability or your responsibility or what is at stake (while all of that may be important in its place): to the degree that I focus on *my part*, I make myself the standard instead of the Christ I am called to unveil in the teaching, which will cultivate either pride or condemnation in the hearer.

So if *this tyrannical hypocrisy is our nature if left to itself*, how are we to be intentional in severing it at the root? The first and best and most constant thing to do is to ask the question in any good thing—What does this thing say about God? Ask yourself about any good thing, whether it is something you read from God’s Law or something you already know to be right or good: ask yourself, ‘What is it that is so good about this thing or this act?’ Cultivate that theological discipline and let it perform a constant surgery on your tumors of hypocrisy.

To the Sinner – The way we make this all sound, that makes anyone who is a sinner a hypocrite, doesn’t it? Yes. And that means that until the day that we die, we will never really ‘mean it’ in the heart like God means it in his? That’s right. You describe the new birth and ‘real Christianity’ as God creating a whole heart that is united and growing in its passion for God. But that doesn’t feel like me. What do I think of what I don’t desire God?

Jesus Christ! He desired the Father perfectly for you, so look “to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” [Heb. 12:2].