

The Measure of True Religion

Exodus 17:1-7; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 20-23

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The version of our faith I learned in Calhoun County back in the 1960s had a lot of rules. These rules weren't necessarily in the Bible, but they were just as important. You may have grown up with some of these yourself. Like no fishing on Sundays. Even if it was after morning church and before evening church. I assumed it was written somewhere in the Bible, "Thou shalt not fish on Sundays."

I started preaching when I was fifteen years old. I couldn't even drive yet. I announced my "call to preach" to my church and started preaching at rural churches around Calhoun County. My father had to drive me to my earliest assignments because I didn't have a driver's license. So everyone knew I was the "preacher boy." One Sunday when I was sixteen or seventeen, I went to Sunday School and worship in the morning. I then went to a pond near my house and fished for a few hours, arriving back home in time to make youth choir practice, Training Union, and evening worship. My neighbor happened to be outside when I arrived home and got out of my car holding a fishing rod in one hand and tackle box in the other. I was busted! I'll never forget his reaction: "Why, I thought you were a preacher," he said with astonishment. "What are *you* doing fishing on Sunday?"

To this day, I have not found the Bible verse that says you should not fish on Sunday. I've read it pretty carefully, and I have not found it. Here's what I have found: that verse is not in the Bible, but that "rule" was just as important to some.

The version of faith I learned in Calhoun County was loaded with these kinds of rules, especially at my saintly maternal grandmother's house. We weren't supposed to make excessive noise on Sundays. I've got two brothers. Do you realize how hard it is for three little boys to not make excessive noise? It's virtually impossible! That meant no football

games in the back yard. No cowboys and Indians. None of most of the things little boys wanted to do back then. It was terrible!

And then when we became teenagers, these rules seemed to grow exponentially. Could we go to the high school dances? Some in my church saw those dances as dens of iniquity that must be avoided. Could we kiss our girlfriend? "It's a slippery slope," some were quick to argue, "and you never know where it's going to end up."

Rules! Everywhere we turned! Rules that weren't necessarily in the Bible. But they were just as important. And I tried to take them seriously. Some of my friends didn't. They just blew them off, but I couldn't do that. I prayed and agonized. Was I a good enough Christian, or was I not? I certainly wanted to be. But some of these rules seemed to be distorted, excessive, unreasonable...oppressive. Obedience to these rules was the measure of faith, I was taught. That was the measure of true religion.

They tried this on Jesus. It was the Pharisees, who were known for this kind of excessive and oppressive interpretation of faith. These particular Pharisees had it in for Jesus. Mark notes that they "had come from Jerusalem." Earlier in Jerusalem, they accused Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebul, the Devil, and tried to kill him (3:6, 22). They trailed Jesus across the Sea of Galilee to Gennesaret, Gentile territory. That's how badly they wanted to get a hold of Jesus. When they caught up to him, they discovered his disciples were doing something incriminating. Aha, they had him! He was busted. Here's what Jesus' disciples were doing. It's bad. They were eating without washing their hands! How awful! Mark calls it, "eating with defiled hands."

Let me insert a brief footnote here. Notice that in most translations verses three and four are set apart in parentheses. These two verses are an insider conversation. Mark was writing to a Gentile audience, and they might not have understood this Jewish tradition regarding hand washing. So Mark put these verses in parenthesis to explain to his Gentile readers why the Jews did this. His explanation goes something like this:

In case you don't know, our Jewish neighbors won't eat unless they wash their hands first. This practice is not necessarily

because their hands are dirty and it's good hygienic practice. No, they do this because of something they call "the tradition of the elders." This is oral teaching that interprets their scripture and helps them apply it to everyday life. It's not their scripture, only someone's interpretation of it. This tradition of the elders says that they must ceremonially wash their hands before eating. It also says that when they leave the marketplace they must bathe. Then they must wash all the pots and pans before they cook with them.

We gotcha', they said to themselves, and then they presented this incriminating question to Jesus, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

Why, I thought you were a preacher. What are *you* doing fishing on Sunday? Who gave these children permission to play football on Sunday afternoon? They are raising a ruckus! You mean, you went to a school dance *and* kissed your girlfriend?

The Pharisees' question is one of the big questions of the New Testament. And Jesus' answer is equally big, an answer many have not yet fully embraced. First, he quoted the prophet Isaiah, about people who try to honor God with their lips but whose hearts are far away from God. How empty were their words when their hearts were far away! Then he called all the people together, and this is what he said:

Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.

Later he went into greater detail with his disciples. This is what he told them:

It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

So what really is the measure of faith? What is the measure of true religion? It's not about washing hands and fishing on Sunday. Those things are trivial. According to Jesus, the measure of true religion is a heart that is near God. All things, good and evil, issue from the human heart. Do we treat our neighbor with respect or contempt? That issues from the heart. Are we kind to people under us, or do we trample upon them? That issues from the human heart. Do we work for justice for all people? Are we genuinely loving? Is our worship real? All these things issue from the heart, so our heart must be near God. Our heart must be transformed by the grace of God. And when the heart is transformed, you may choose to wash your hands, or, like the disciples, you may choose not to. You may choose to go fishing on Sunday afternoon, or you may choose not to. You may even choose to kiss your girlfriend. A transformed heart can handle that.

That's a version of our faith I wasn't taught in Calhoun County in the 1960s. But I found it. I found it in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. I found that this is the version of faith that Jesus himself taught and practiced. It's based on freedom that is balanced by responsibility. It is born out of God's grace and our maturity, and it is life giving. Rules are not unimportant. They have a place. But they are not the measure of true religion. The measure of true religion is a heart that is near God, a heart that has been transformed by the grace of God. Find that and you will find that it is life giving.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we aim too low. We create little gods and little religions, and they almost kill us. Free us from that and teach us how to live in your life giving grace. Amen.