

THE MAIN THING

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Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, September 3, 2017

Today, I want us to travel to the edge of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus was teaching His disciples about the real Kingdom of God. Today, some visitors have arrived from Jerusalem to observe Jesus in action.

Into the opening passage, John, the writer, inserts a parenthetical description of the Pharisees. We'll look at that in a minute, but for now, let's omit that section and just read verses 1, 2, and 5 together.

Mark 7:1 One day some Pharisees and teachers of religious law arrived from Jerusalem to see Jesus. ² They noticed that some of His disciples failed to follow the Jewish ritual of hand washing before eating. ⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, "Why don't your disciples follow our age-old tradition? They eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony."

Just say the name, "Pharisee," to a Christian today and they tend to cringe inside. Why is that? Because it was Pharisees who often challenged what Jesus said, or criticized what Jesus did. And why is that?

Pharisees were one of the two main groups of religious Jews in the time of Jesus. The other group were the Sadducees.

Sadducees were the Jewish aristocracy—wealthy landowners mostly. They drove Mercedes or Beamers, wore tailored clothing, and ate at fine restaurants. They also held most of the 70 seats in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish parliament and high court. Sadducees believed that the Bible (Old Testament) was a book of spiritual stories from which they derived principles of living, but they refuted the reality of a spirit-world, disbelieving in angels or an after-life. They were the liberal mainline church of Jesus' day.

Pharisees, on the other hand, were the conservative evangelicals of their day, believing that the Bible was the literal Word of God. They believed in angels and demons and a bodily resurrection to the after-life. They were the middle-class workers that made the world go round, driving Honda sedans and Ford trucks. Only a few of them sat in the Sanhedrin, even though they were the largest group of Jews.

It was the Pharisees' conservative interpretation and literal application of the Scriptures that brought them into conflict with Jesus. For instance, take this passage... Let's read verses 3 and 4 now and let John explain what their issue was this time.

Mark 7:3 (The Jews, especially the Pharisees, do not eat until they have poured water over their cupped hands, as required by their ancient traditions. ⁴ Similarly, they don't eat anything from the market until they immerse their hands in water. This is but one of many traditions they have clung to—such as their ceremonial washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles.)

These Pharisees didn't start out hating Jesus. They were cautiously curious about Jesus (as most conservatives are about anyone who practices religion in a way that is different from the mainstream).

The first verse tells us that these Jews came from Jerusalem "to see Jesus." The Sea of Galilee, where Jesus was staying and teaching, was about 85 miles from Jerusalem. Walking on foot, that would be a five-day walk, so this was no casual visit. They were stirred enough by what they heard Jesus was doing, and concerned enough about what they thought Jesus was teaching, that they earnestly needed to see and hear Him for themselves.

Their critical observation of His disciples' lack of religious decorum was only natural for them; they had developed an eye for that sort of thing. (In the course of my writing, I have developed an eye for spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Now I can't read anything without noting errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. I don't mean any harm by it; it's just the way I read.) The Pharisees weren't bashing Jesus, but sincerely asking about what they observed, as teachers do, in an effort to help by correction.

But Jesus saw that the problem went deeper than ritual observance and spread wider than proper conformity. From His insightful point of view, it was a systemic spiritual problem.

Mark 7:6 Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁷ Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.' ⁸ For you ignore God's law and substitute your own tradition."

Substitution. They tended to substitute their own traditions for God's actual commands.

Not that that was their original intention. Religious traditions usually begin as a meaningful application of God's commands to a specific situation or as a way of encouraging mindfulness of God's commands.

"Mindfulness" is a spiritual buzzword in our day, often used on a level equal to "born again" or "filled with the Holy Spirit." It is a way of focusing attention and directing one's thoughts. Mindfulness is the stuff from which religious or spiritual rituals are created.

Jesus understood that religious or spiritual rituals only serve for a short time before they threaten to take over, becoming a substitute for the original idea. The means becomes the end. The ritual itself becomes “the thing,” instead of the original commandment that it was intended to honor. He gave an example:

Mark 7:9 Then He said, “You skillfully sidestep God’s law in order to hold on to your own tradition. ¹⁰ For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and ‘Anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father or mother must be put to death.’ ¹¹ But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, ‘Sorry, I can’t help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.’ ¹² In this way, you let them disregard their needy parents. ¹³ And so you cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own tradition. And this is only one example among many others.”

The commandment that was intended to safeguard and preserve the sacred relationship of parenthood, was subjugated, and thereby negated, by their tradition of making financial vows (pledges) to God (which may seem like a holier thing to do), and neglecting their parents.

Let me be clear: God said, “Honor your parents.” He did not say, “Give Me your money.” The first is in black-and-white; the latter is a subjective conjecture (what we sometimes call “following the voice of the Spirit”).

Test what you think the Spirit is saying to you. That’s not unbelief; that’s what the Bible says to do. First, make sure it agrees with the Word and character of God, as He is revealed in Jesus Christ. Then make sure it does not eclipse a clear command of Scripture. If you’re good on those two points, then obey the voice of the Spirit in faith.

Then, Jesus addressed the concern that they presented: spiritual defilement (an action that renders you unacceptable before God—not in an eternal sense, but in the sense of being out of alignment with God’s will—and undermines and defeats your prayers).

Mark 7:14 Then Jesus called to the crowd to come and hear. “All of you listen,” He said, “and try to understand. ¹⁵ It’s not what goes into your body that defiles you; you are defiled by what comes from your heart.”

The Pharisees were so concerned about what they ate, and how it was prepared and served, and when it was eaten, that every meal was a ritual. Jesus was more concerned about what they permitted to enter and live in their hearts and minds than what passed through their stomachs.

Mark 7:17 Then Jesus went into a house to get away from the crowd, and His disciples asked him what He meant by the parable He had just used. ¹⁸ “Don’t you understand either?” He asked. “Can’t you see that the food you put into your body cannot defile you? ¹⁹ Food doesn’t go into

your heart, but only passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer.” (By saying this, He declared that every kind of food is acceptable in God’s eyes.)

²⁰ And then He added, “It is what comes from inside that defiles you. ²¹ For from within, out of a person’s heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. ²³ All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you.”

The thoughts that we permit...

The thoughts that we entertain...

The thoughts that we spend time with...

Now, this is a long list. Do you think Jesus knew what He was talking about? Do you think He actually intended to include all of these things in the same sentence, and put them all under the same condemnation?

You probably take exception to some of them. Maybe “murder and adultery” have never been a part of your thinking. But be careful of the tendency to ignore everything else because of one or two that don’t fit you. What about “envy, slander, pride, and foolishness”?

Do these things really “defile” you spiritually? Do they interfere with your prayer life? Jesus was teaching that—even if you don’t carry those thoughts into your prayer closet when you pray—if you dwell on such things Saturday night, they can impact negatively your experience with God on Sunday morning.

The solution is to carefully not ignore or minimize things that are clearly presented in God’s Word as commands and cautions. Avoid compartmentalizing your life, especially your thought life, or imagining that there is no bleed-through from one setting in your life to another. There is.

If you’re serious about following Jesus Christ and growing in your faith, then become intentional about this. Paul tells us how:

Philippians 4:8 *And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. ⁹ Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you.*

True. (And what is “true” if not Jesus?)

Honorable. (And who is “honorable” if not Jesus?)

Right. Jesus!

Pure. Jesus!

Lovely. Jesus!

Admirable. Jesus!

Excellent. Jesus!

Praise-worthy. Jesus, for sure!

Train yourself to think about these things. Practice it. A lot. If you give yourself intentionally to this, the other thoughts will diminish on their own. They may still present themselves from time to time, but they will have lost their power to take over. Hallelujah!

The main thing is to keep the “Main Thing” the main thing. Don’t be distracted or discouraged by issues, circumstances, preferences, or feelings. Just keep loving Jesus Christ with all your heart, mind, and soul.

Perhaps you need to repent today for majoring in minors, for letting side issues become the main thing in your eyes, for moving Jesus off to one side, instead of keeping Him on the throne of your heart.

Admit where you’ve let rituals become like commandments in your life, and allowed your heart to grow harder, more rigid.

Receive the Father’s forgiveness, and ask for the Holy Spirit’s help to turn things around, to make the Main Thing (Jesus) the main thing for you again.

Now practice thinking the way Paul described. Do it thoughtfully. Do it frequently. Think on these things.