

Humans love rules. Sure, we like to say we love freedom, but there's a part of us that really loves rules, too. Have you ever heard, or perhaps said, there ought to be a law against that!? When I was in college, I was known to say quite often that all textbooks should be required by law to have a proper index. Even kids love rules. Have you ever listened to kids playing a game and the never ending and ever-changing list of rules they'll make up? Stephen Hawking was said to love rules so much that as a child he would make up games so complicated no one could play them because he made so many rules.

The laws laid down in the bible for the Jewish people number 613. Some are simple enough; know that there is a God, don't lie cheat or steal. Others are more puzzling, such as the prohibition against wearing garments of mixed materials. One would think this is probably enough laws. 613 of anything feels like a lot, but the rabbis had other ideas. They took the laws of the Bible and expanded them to a point that Judaism became even harder. The Bible might say for one to wash their hands before or after something. The Rabbis would prescribe detailed rituals on how this was to be done. You had to hold your hands a certain way and let the water run down to a certain point on your wrist, you had to use a certain amount of water, the water had to come from a certain clean jar, and so on. And so, more and more laws and rules were added until the litmus test for being a good jew had more to do with how you washed your dishes than what was in your heart.

And so, the Pharisees try and trap Jesus with questions about why his people aren't observing some of these rabbinical laws. But Jesus sees this and all things as they are. Dirt is just that, a bit of dust from the road, dead skin cells, so on. There is nothing inherently sinful about dirt, and dirt alone lacks the power to corrupt the human heart. It's exactly the other way around; what's in the human heart is what corrupts.

Think of it another way; if every human could be teleported off earth and all that was left were the animals and nature, there would be no sin anywhere on the planet. The turtles wouldn't be running gambling rings, the bears

wouldn't be performing bank robberies. The cats might well begin a post to take over the world, but nothing outside of their nature.

The human heart is the source of defilement, not a dirty cup or hand, though please do continue to wash your hands as we head toward cold and flu season.

And this habit of creating additional rules is not lost, not even today. Many churches and denominations have added rules religious life that are not found in Scripture, or have been expanded from Scripture. I think of some of the church sects that forbade cabbage patch dolls and furbies, that prohibit coffee and soda, that believe your hair must be done a certain way or that only certain musical instruments are pure.

These rules usually start as a quest for purity, and purity is important. It is very true that when the heart is left unchecked, sinful behavior can grow, but the point that is missed is that it is the heart which drives the behavior, not that cup of coffee.

What begins as a quest for purity quickly deteriorates into discrimination and control. If you don't dress like us, then you're not as good as us. If you don't follow our rules you're out of the club. People begin to be judged by rules created by humans, instead of by God. And this was what the pharisees were doing; they were excluding others based on rules that the pharisees had made up, instead of considering what mattered to God.

What the pharisees and even some modern churches miss, is that the heart cannot be so easily tainted. The evil within one's heart is what leads people to commit evil, not rules about washing or clothing or food. The rules were made to protect the heart against corrupting itself, not the external things.

When evil is allowed to continue unchecked, it always, always grows. When Scripture gives us rules about our behavior it is not the action that makes us unclean, but the evil allowed to flourish within our hearts. For example, Scripture has very clear rules about not lying, not because the lies somehow corrupt the heart. I could prompt you to to play two truths and a lie right now and you'd be none the worse for wear. What does corrupt is allowing the hart to desire whatever it gains from the lie, and when evil is fed it grows. Consider the commandment not to commit adultery.

Obviously, the act itself does not corrupt the heart, but allowing the heart to desire and achieve things it is not meant to have does corrupt.

We see this time and again. The criminal who begins with petty theft and moves up to more terrible crimes, the person that starts with flirting outside his or her marriage and proceeds to cross even more lines, the person who allows themselves to become ever more selfish. The corruption comes from evil being let off its chains within the human heart. Sin is an inside problem, not an outside problem.

And this is where Jesus proves himself to be different from all other religions. When humanity asks what we must do to be right with God, each religion answers with things like offering food to idols, chant the names of favored gods, complete this ritual or that, wash this way, or pay this money. Jesus says that none of these outward things will make right what is an inside problem. Jesus answer that we must do nothing, or Jesus has already done all and no ritual can ever contribute to what has already taken place. Jesus wants to fix the inward problem of our hearts, not the empty rituals of our hands.

Friends, never confuse acts of piety for true faith. Faith comes from the heart, and when a heart is filled with faith, good things will flow from it, like love, encouragement, charity, and peace. On the other hand, the list of people who appear too pious but have serious sins plaguing their lives in long. There's actually several lists being regularly updated of disgraced popular pastors, some of whom you might know, who were seen as the purest of people, but whose heart led them into terrible sins. I won't mention them here as that seems inappropriate, but I'm sure we could all think of a few.

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