

The Law Is Good, If . . .

Mark 7:1-23

There was a raging battle going on when the New Testament was being written – and it had to do with God’s Law. The Apostle Paul lays out the major issue of the debate in **I Timothy 1:3-8**,

“As I urged you [Timothy] when I went into Macedonia [modern day Greece], stay there in Ephesus [modern day Turkey] so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines . . . ⁷ They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm. ⁸ We know that the law is good if one uses it properly” [literally if one uses it lawfully, the way God’s Law was intended to be used].

When Paul wrote to Timothy, a widespread misuse of God’s Law was the notion that people are justified before God due to their ability to successfully keep God’s Law. Prior to the Apostle Paul’s conversion to Christ, he was taught and believed that error – as he testifies in

Philippians 3:4-9,

“If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh [our own abilities], I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel [many Jews thought that physical circumcision and their bloodline to Abraham made them God’s elect. Paul had both] . . . in regard to the law, a Pharisee [they were considered the best at keeping God’s Law] . . . ⁶ as to righteousness under the law, faultless [before his conversion, Paul was like that deluded young man in Mark 10, who told Jesus he had always kept the Ten Commandments. No, he didn’t]. ⁷ But whatever was to my profit [the things Paul once relied upon in order to gain God’s approval], I now consider loss . . . ⁸ that I may gain Christ . . . ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ.”

As long as Paul thought he had right standing with God by means of his

bloodline and good works, he had no need for Christ. But after Paul met the holy, ascended Lord Jesus on his way to Damascus, he realized how sinful he was – which shattered all his self-confidence. He then went back to the Old Testament with fresh, new eyes, and saw that the Law and the Prophets had always been pointing to Christ [just as Jesus said in Luke 24:27]. It was then that the Apostle Paul understood one of the true purposes of God’s Law. Listen to what he writes in **Romans 3:20**,

“ . . . no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” [which shows us our need for a Savior].

The reason Paul and the rich, young ruler had **not been convicted of their sin** by God’s Moral Law is because the rabbis had obscured God’s Law by encapsulating it with their man-made traditions and false interpretations – which was another major way God’s Law was being abused at the time of Christ and the Apostles. It is this second misuse of God’s Law that Christ condemns in Mark 7:1-13,

“The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus [they had traveled about a hundred miles – not to listen and learn from the Son of God, but to try to refute Him. In verse 2 the debate begins . . . they] ² saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were ‘unclean,’ that is, unwashed. ³ [Mark now explains] (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴ When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles). [Most of us wash our hands before we eat for hygienic reasons. The Jews did it because they believed eating with unclean hands or eating nonkosher food actually polluted a person’s soul and made them unworthy of God’s favor]. ⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus,

‘Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?’⁶ He replied, ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites [a hypocrite is a person who pretends to be what he knows he is not. These religious leaders did not love God; they loved their rules – which gave them control over people]; as it is written: [Isaiah 29:13] ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me [that was true in Isaiah’s day and it was true of many Jewish people at the time of Christ].⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men [this problem is quite obvious in main line churches today who ignore the Word of God so they can follow the latest trends in secular thinking].⁹ And he said to them: You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ [which is the fifth of the Ten Commandments – Exodus 20:12] and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ [Jesus is now referring to one of God’s Civil Laws – recorded in Exodus 21:17].¹¹ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God),¹² then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

Let’s back up and ask, **how** did the tradition of ceremonially washing hands originate? It may have sprung from Exodus 40:30-32, where we are told that Moses, Aaron and his sons washed their hands and feet whenever they entered the tabernacle to do the work God had set them apart to do. The original reason why Jews in general may have been instructed to wash their hands was to encourage all Jewish people to live set apart lives to God. That is good. However, it seems that these added regulations eventually became as important as God’s commands – and in Jesus’ day even more important because man-made traditions enabled adult children

to willfully neglect helping their aged parents, and thus violate the fifth commandment.

Last week Victor Kuligen spoke of “Bible believing churches” ignoring God’s clear command to live together in peace and unity – so they can fight and split over such trivial things as the color of carpet. That characterizes a church filled with people just going through the motions, but their hearts are far from God?

I want to draw your attention back to verse 10, where Jesus refers to both God’s Moral Law and Civil Law. The Moral Law is summarized by the Ten Commandments, and is the standard of right and wrong, for all people of all nations. I think we all agree that it isn’t just Jewish people who are to honor their parents. God’s Moral Law is stamped upon the conscience of mankind. Listen to **Romans 2:14-15**,

“Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the [written] law, do by nature things required by the law . . . ¹⁵ [it] shows that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness.”

This is why it is never safe to go against our conscience. However, our conscience can be twisted and seared by our culture and by our own personal sin. This is why God’s written Law is a better guide than our conscience. Most people respect God’s Moral Law even when they don’t obey it – because deep inside they know it is right.

I find that Christians today are most conflicted by God’s Civil Law, which lays down just penalties for those who violate God’s Moral Law. I have spoken with Christian friends and read evangelical commentaries that view some of the penalties of God’s Civil Law as being harsh and even

barbaric. Let's examine that thinking by looking at Exodus 21:17, which is quoted by Jesus in Mark 7:10. And may I remind you that Jesus quotes this civil law with approval, not with embarrassment. I am going to read **Exodus 21:15 and 17**, because both verses give us tangible examples of **not** honoring our parents – and show us how serious this is to God,

“Anyone who attacks his father or his mother must be put to death . . .
¹⁷ Anyone who curses his father or mother [which is another form of attacking parents] must be put to death.”

This civil law [or case law] is not referring to a sixth grader, who woke up on the wrong side of the bed, and didn't want to take out the trash. No, this case law refers to a young man who has become dangerous. This is seen even more clearly in the parallel passage of **Deuteronomy 21:18-21**,

“If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother and will not listen to them when they discipline him,¹⁹ his father and mother shall take hold of him [probably with the help of some other adults] and bring him to the elders at the gate of his town.²⁰ They shall say to the elders, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a degenerate and a drunkard’ [this is not a twelve year old].²¹ Then [if this report proves to be true] all the men of his town shall stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid.”

Do you think it was easy for these parents to bring their son before the elders of the city to be tried? No, it was very difficult. But the reason they were to do so is because their son had become a danger to them and to the community. For these parents to truly love their neighbor – meant taking their son before the elders in order to get their wisdom on this matter.

Question: Have any of you ever read in the Old Testament where a

rebellious son was stoned to death by the verdict of the elders? No. One of the explanations as to why, appears just a few verses after Exodus

21:17. Look with me at **Exodus 21:28-30**,

“If a bull gores a man or a woman to death, the bull must be stoned to death, and its meat must not be eaten. But the owner of the bull will not be held responsible [his punishment was losing any profit from that bull].

²⁹ If, however, the bull has had the habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept it penned up and it kills a man or woman, the bull must be stoned and the owner also must be put to death. ³⁰ However, if payment is demanded of him, he may redeem his life by paying whatever is demanded.”

Let’s connect the dots between this passage and Exodus 21:17. A rebellious son, convicted of being a threat to his parents and community, could repent and redeem his life by paying a substitute penalty. Who does that regulation point to? The Lord Jesus Christ, who has redeemed us from an eternal death penalty by becoming our perfect substitute for sin. Exodus 21:30 shows there was grace within the penalties of God’s Civil Law. Listen to what the writer of Hebrews says about the penalties of God’s Civil Law in **Hebrews 2:2**, “. . . the message spoken by angels [referring to the Ten Commandments] was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment.” In other words, the punishments laid down in God’s Civil Law are just. They are not too lenient – nor are they overly harsh. That is why as a Christian, I believe it is worth my time to carefully ponder what God considers to be fair and just penalties for wrong behavior.

As we have just seen, there was grace within the penalties God laid out

for wrong behavior – for those who repented of their wrong doing. But let's not make light of God's stern rebuke to adults who attack and curse their parents. God says it is worthy of death. And it is safe to say that a culture filled with adults who hate their parents is a culture on its deathbed. In Christ's day the traditions of the elders allowed adult Jews to hate their parents without repentance or fear of reprisal. That is one of the reasons why that generation of Jews faced a bleak future.

So far we have seen that God's Moral Law and Civil Law were highly esteemed by Jesus, which is why he condemned the religious leaders for cluttering it with their traditions. But there is yet another division of God's Law which Jesus deals with in verses 14-20,

“Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a man can make him [morally] ‘unclean’ by going into him [the context is food]. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’ ¹⁷ After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. ¹⁸ ‘Are you so dull?’ he asked. ‘Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? ¹⁹ For it doesn’t go into his heart [or mind] but into his stomach, and then out of his body’ [into the latrine]. (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean’) [For the Jews of Christ day, that was an alarming statement]. ²⁰ He went on: ‘What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’”

When Jesus declared all foods clean, it demonstrated that the Ceremonial division of God's Law was being brought to an end. Let me give you an example of some Ceremonial Laws we are not under today. I trust we all acknowledge that we no longer need to offer animal sacrifices for our sins – which also means we will never again need a stone temple.

We do not need to eat Kosher food [a point Jesus just made].

Circumcision of the flesh is no longer the outward sign of being in covenant with God. And we can now wear clothing made of a cotton and polyester blend. Jews in the Old Covenant were forbidden to do that.

Why did God give food laws and clothing laws to Israel? Because many of Israel's Ceremonial Laws were designed to help keep the Jews a separate people from the Gentiles. Was that because God did not care about Gentiles? No, it was because there needed to be a Jewish nation in order for the Messiah to be born of the Jews, from the tribe of Judah, in the town of Bethlehem – as was promised by God. Now that those prophecies have been fulfilled and Christ has become the perfect substitute for the sins of both the Jews and the Gentiles, the Ceremonial Law has served its primary purpose, although it can still be studied with profit. This is why the Apostle Paul refers to Ceremonial Laws as shadows in Colossians 2:17.

Let's finish this morning by looking at Mark 7:21-23, which states the true source of the evils – which really do make people morally unclean,

“For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,²² greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.²³ All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'”

One of the implications of this truth is that Satan could be playing golf at the far side of the universe and the hearts of fallen people would continue to pump out these kind of evils. It is because of this reality that lost people stand condemned before God – who knows their hearts. Please listen carefully. God's Moral Law is designed to convict people of their

sins, but it doesn't have the power to change peoples' hearts. The penalties of God's Civil Law, when faithfully carried out by civil authorities, can restrain people from acting out on their evil desires. This helps to protect law abiding people from law breakers. But again, while God's Civil Law may restrain evil behavior, but it doesn't have the power to change the heart, which is the source of evil behavior. Only the gospel has the power to change the inside of people – so they no longer want their hearts to provide room and board for evil desires.

And so I need to ask you this morning, has your heart been changed? We cannot stop evil desires from popping into our minds, but followers of Christ cannot cozy up and be comfortable with evil thoughts. We need to do what the Apostle Paul taught in **Philippians 4:8-9**,

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things [but Paul does not stop there] ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

We cannot just be hearers of God's Word, we must learn to be eager doers of God's Word, as was the Apostle Paul. Since the Apostle Paul is not with us today, we need to spend time with other mature Christians who display the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” What a contrast to what Jesus said comes out of the hearts of unbelievers.

The religious leaders of Israel in Christ's day knew a lot about God's Law, but their hearts were far from God. But let me hasten to say that

many people today know a lot about the gospel, but are still lost and far from God. The problem is not God's Law or the gospel. It is our sinful hearts. And so what characterizes genuine followers of Christ? (1) They are people who know that they cannot fix their sin problem in their own strength. Only by trusting in God's perfect provision for our sins, can we be forgiven and made whole. If you are trying to be good enough to earn your salvation, you have not yet truly believed the gospel.

(2) But when you do fully put your trust in Christ alone for your salvation – you will begin your journey of becoming more like Christ. And on that journey, you will discover that God's Law is not your enemy, it is your friend and guide in helping you to embrace what God embraces and shun what God shuns. Keep **Philippians 4:8-9** in mind as you contemplate Psalm 19:7-11, which describes and exalts God's Law,

“The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.¹¹ By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

God's Law doesn't save us, but it does guide us as to how to live Christ-honoring lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why Psalm 1:2 encourages us to meditate upon God's Law, day and night. Please remember, the New Testament never speaks against God's Law. It speaks against the misuse of God's Law. Let's Pray.