

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church

Sermon Summary #19

The Soul-Shrinking Wretchedness of Religion Mark 7:1-23

There was a time here in the U.S. when the word “religion” was viewed in a positive light. To speak of someone as being “religious” was a good thing. It generally meant that he/she was a sincere Christian, a faithful member of some local church body, a person who was moral and honest and deeply devoted and passionate about their commitment to God. Not anymore! “Religion” and “religious” have almost become cuss words in many circles.

Nowadays, to be “religious” is to be legalistic and lifeless and hypocritical and devoted to dead tradition or meaningless ritualism. “Religion” has now become almost synonymous with artificial and formal and insincere and lacking authenticity. “Religion”, many contend, is what’s killing Christianity in America. Religion is simply what people do on a Sunday morning, but has nothing to do with how they live or what they believe the other six days of the week. To say someone is “religious” means they equate being an American with being a Christian. They may go through the motions and say the right words and give their money in generous support of the church, **but they don’t mean it. They do it to maintain an image and to preserve their position in society.**

When you read our text for the first time, it sounds like it is about **traditionalism**. Jesus charges the Pharisees and other religious leaders with elevating their own man-made religious traditions above the commandments of God.

On the other hand, it also appears to be about **hypocrisy**, as Jesus denounces them for professing one thing while practicing another.

Yet again, one can also see elements in this text of **legalism**, as the religious leaders in Jesus’ day evidently believed they could put God in their debt by obeying their own rules; they appear to suggest that they are more spiritual because of their faithful obedience to rules nowhere found in the Bible and that others who fail to live up to their standards are less spiritual.

So here we have Jesus confronting traditionalism, hypocrisy, and legalism all at once. I’ve decided to take **all three of these poisonous threats to true spirituality** and combine them into one ugly mess and to call it “religion”. Or perhaps “religiosity” might be a better term.

At its core, *religion is all about external appearance as over against the internal reality*. Religion is about **image, not essence**. *Religion is based on the belief that getting things in order on the outside will take care of whatever problems you have on the inside*. Religion is an approach to one’s relationship with God which says that the greatest threat we face is outside of us and the solution is inside of us. Christianity says that the greatest threat is inside of us and the solution is outside of us. Religion is what you do by your efforts to gain acceptance with God. Christianity is what God has done to make you acceptable by grace because of who Jesus is and what he has done on your behalf.

Religion may appear as traditionalism: the idea that careful attention to doing things the way we’ve always done them will make us righteous, even though God never commanded that we do it that way. Traditionalism says that conformity to an outward ritual or a rule of our own making or a rule that was made by our ancestors, a rule or ritual that lacks support in God’s Word, is what makes us right and good and acceptable to God and gives us value and worth. By the way, there’s nothing wrong with *tradition*. Tradition and traditionalism are not the same thing.

Religion may appear as hypocrisy: hypocrisy is simply pretending to be moral or spiritual or a lover of God in order to gain the praise and approval of people, even though we don’t truly believe what we say nor are we truly committed to what we do.

Religion may appear as legalism: legalism is primarily the tendency to think that we can gain God’s blessing and the applause of people and demonstrate that we are more spiritual and that we love God more simply by living according to rules that cannot be found in Scripture.

Religion, then, is a spiritually artificial approach to life and a relationship with God which focuses on what people can see; it is obsessed with the problems that surround us but ignores the inherent wickedness and depravity of our own hearts. It is a view of life which says that so long as what I do on the outside looks good and wins the approval of people, what happens on the inside is largely irrelevant. I can compensate for the absence of genuine repentance and faith in my heart by obeying certain rules and abiding by the expectations of others.

Nowhere do we see religion in this sense of the term more in evidence than we do in the **Pharisees** of the first century. But who were these people anyway?

Pharisees and Pharisaism . . . Notice their complaint as found in 7:1-5 . . .

God intended for the law of ritual cleaning to serve a **symbolic** function. This had nothing to do with personal hygiene or physical cleanliness or a fear of germs or catching a cold! According to the OT, only priests were required to wash before entering the tabernacle and performing their duties (Ex. 30:19; 40:13; Lev. 22:1-6). For others, it was required only if you touched a bodily discharge (Lev. 15:11). *External, physical washing was designed to symbolize the need for internal, spiritual cleansing of the heart.*

Where did the Pharisees get the idea that ritual washings were required for these many activities? **“The tradition of the elders” (v. 3b)**. This is a reference to what is known as oral tradition, that is to say, these were regulations created by Rabbis down through history that were designed to interpret and apply the written law of the OT.

Our Lord’s response to this protest leads us to look more closely at the soul-shrinking wretchedness of religion. There are five dimensions to “religiosity” that threaten true spirituality:

(1) Religion distorts the meaning of worship, leading people to believe that merely conforming to an external standard or observing a ritual can compensate for the absence of an internal spiritual passion (7:6-7). See Isaiah 1:10-17 and Amos 5:21-24.

(2) Religion leads you to elevate man-made traditions and rules over and above the commandments of God as revealed in Scripture (7:8-13).

(3) Religion makes it possible for a person to have an appearance of godliness while remaining unconverted (cf. Mt. 15:13-14; 6:5).

(4) Religion prevents a person from dealing honestly with the real source of sin: the human heart (7:14-23).

The Pharisees insisted that unwashed hands defiled the food that you eat, which in turn defiled the soul. Jesus says it’s just the opposite! Spiritual and moral contamination don’t come into us from the outside but arise within us and go out! The physical doesn’t defile the spiritual. The problem isn’t with our environment. The problem is with our hearts. Our problem isn’t unwashed hands, but unwashed souls. In other words, spiritual and moral defilement don’t originate from outside us. They come from within: from the heart, from wicked thoughts, from lustful and lying and deceiving and sensuality and pride and envy and slander and other expressions of a depraved and fallen heart.

Note: v. 19 and Mark’s editorial comment – “Thus he declared all foods clean.” By “all foods” he means those foods that were prohibited in the Mosaic Law.

(5) Finally, religion distorts the character of true holiness and godliness, by defining it in terms of external practice only rather than in terms of internal purity (7:14-23).

So why did I entitle this message, “The Soul-Shrinking Wretchedness of Religion”? Because that’s what religion does. It shrinks the soul. It shrivels the spirit. It hinders the mind from seeing the beauty of God’s grace in Jesus. It blinds our spiritual sight from beholding the grandeur of God’s greatness. It reduces us to spiritual pygmies. It stunts our spiritual growth. It turns the human heart into a wretched deformity of what God intends it to be.