

Empty Religion

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[0 : 00] Well, hey, good morning. My name is Ray Sweet from First Christian Church in Greensburg, Indiana. Thank you so much for tuning in to this radio broadcast. God's Word just has a way of piercing our hearts and truly drawing us to Himself.

And I'm so thankful that that's what the Word does, that it sets us free, and that it truly is that spiritual nourishment that we need every day. And so it's my prayer over your heart and mine as well today that God will just take these words and that He will just stir our hearts and He will draw us closer to Him.

Now, during a presidential campaign, there was a group that came to see Theodore Roosevelt at his home in Oyster Bay, Long Island. He met him outside with his coat off and his sleeves rolled up and he said, Well, gentlemen, good to see you. I got some work I need to get done, so I hope you don't mind that we're going to head down to the barn and talk while I work.

Well, as they entered the barn, he picked up a pitchfork, expecting to see a pile of hay, but it wasn't there. So he excused himself away from the guys and called out to one of his workers and he said, Where's all the hay?

And that's when John called down from the hayloft, not realizing he was with another delegation. And he said, Sorry, sir, I ain't had time to toss it back down after you pitched it up when the Iowa folks were here.

[1 : 19] See, that story fits a word that comes from the ancient world of play acting, where in those days it was common to have one actor play several different parts in a play.

They didn't have the elaborate stage sets that we have today, but they did have a different mask that each character would use. And one person may wear three or four different masks during the play.

And that's where we get this word hypocrite as someone who wears different masks. And while I think we heave that word probably around way too much in our culture without looking in the mirror ourselves, if you read through the Gospels, you see Jesus use this word several times, especially with the scribes and the Pharisees, men who were religious leaders.

And while you hear people often talk about the humility and meekness and compassion and the love of Jesus, which are all undeniable, as you follow along with his ministry, you also see a boldness and accountability, a righteousness, a holiness and a ferociousness for the truth that will set us free.

See, Jesus was all these things at the same time. And as you turn with me today to the book of Mark, Mark chapter seven, you're about three quarters the way through your Bible.

[2 : 41] And today's passage is honestly a little bit harder to wrap our arms around. It's been easier working through some of the passages that we've studied here lately, like Jesus calling the disciples to follow him, Jesus calming the wind and the waves, or even when he fed 5,000 men and their families with five loaves and two fish.

And yet, as we continue in the sixth week of this series called Disciple, we see Jesus make it clear that religious titles and degrees and even talent doesn't automatically make you what the Bible calls a disciple.

It's all about the heart that truly beats for the kingdom of God, a heart fully surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Now, here we are in Mark 7, and let's start off with these first five verses. The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem, they gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

Now, let me just stop there for a second. So basically, they send the most powerful religious leaders, the sharpest minds of their day. They come from Jerusalem.

[3 : 54] They gather around Jesus, and they are there to try to trap him in his words, to make people stop following him, to ruin his influence. Verse 3, So the Pharisees and the 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 defiled hands?

So, at this point, we're right at about a year before Jesus would be crucified on the cross. They clearly are trying to get rid of him because he was a threat to their religious empire. And when they come attacking his disciples for eating with unwashed hands, the only scripture they have at their disposal is the Mosaic law in Leviticus 22, 6, and 7.

And that only required ceremonial washing for priests. But this is what legalism frequently does. See, legalism is often insecurity masked as godly passion that seeks to do three things, to justify self-centeredness, fuel self-righteousness, and serve self-interest.

Let me say that again. Legalism is often insecurity masked as godly passion that seeks to justify self-centeredness, fuel self-righteousness, and serve self-interest.

And over the course of centuries, these Pharisees and scribes had come up with about 613 extra-biblical laws. And to be fair, I'm sure it wasn't all done with bad intentions.

[5 : 37] I'm sure that they thought they were creating a wall of protection around God's laws to keep people from even getting close. But we know that it's always, always dangerous when you add rules or add laws where God's word doesn't.

And it's even more dangerous when those things or even well-meaning traditions start to take precedence over the word of God. Now, can I tell you for a second why I love the Christian church brotherhood, what's called the Stone Campbell Restoration Movement, that our church has been a part of since it started on the courthouse lawn when they rang the bell to draw people to worship way back in 1832?

See, we're a self-governing church, which means we have no outside hierarchy or denomination that we report to. We have no one that dictates what we do outside of our church because of what we see in the New Testament church.

We are elder-led by a group of men held to biblical qualifications. And listen, they're not perfect, just like you and I aren't, but they're great examples of following Christ every day as they lead our church.

And I love the fact that back in the early 1800s, this movement of churches started with men and women getting fed up with man-made creeds and doctrines and traditions guiding the local church.

[6 : 58] And they said, okay, no more. And they started this unity-based movement going back to the Bible as the sole authority. And here's some phrases that you'll hear in our churches.

Where the Bible speaks, we speak. Where the Bible is silent, we're silent. In matters of essentials, unity. In matters of opinion, liberty. But in all things, love.

And we have no creed but Christ. And listen, I'm thankful to serve at a church where the Word of God, in a culture, even a church culture, that is kind of discarding the Word of God and watering it down and picking and choosing.

I'm thankful to serve at a church where the Word of God is our authority on everything we do. So, if you have your outline, and don't forget, you can always go to the YouVersion Bible app, the YouVersion, Y-O-U-Version Bible app, click on Events, click on First Christian Church of Greensburg, and you can come to our outline that way.

But I want to talk today about some dangers of empty religion that we see these religious leaders championing here in Mark 7. So here's the first thing. In empty religion, tradition is elevated above God's Word.

[8 : 12] Tradition is elevated above God's Word. Now, I want to make sure I come across correctly here. Okay? Traditions can be great tools to draw us closer to the Lord as long as they follow biblical mandates.

But where we get into trouble is when man's traditions start to supersede God's Word and authority, or maybe they're just not helpful anymore to fulfill our biblical command to go make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey God's truth.

So let me give you a couple very small examples of this. For one summer when I was in Bible college, I was a youth minister at a small church. And anyone who knows me knows that that is not

my gifting.

But it was fun for a summer, and we built it up a little bit. And while I fully admit that I was young in my faith at the time, very spiritually immature in knowing how to address things within the church, so I admit my own fault in this, but I'll never forget I got to preach one time that summer.

And I had asked for a very small alteration to how communion would be served to try to give people a little bit more time to reflect on the message.

[9 : 24] See, normally they just went through communion really quickly with really no time to reflect on what Jesus did on the cross. And that's what we're told in Scripture. That's the whole point of the Lord's Supper, to reflect on the cross.

So I simply asked for more time of reflection, and you would have thought I was a heretic by my response, or by the response I got back. I got wrung over the coals, okay?

And I got over that, no big deal. And then after working hard to build up the youth group over the summer, as that summer was coming to a close, three or four kids I had been pouring into wanted to be baptized into Christ.

And when I started to inquire about baptizing them because they wanted me to do it, I was quickly informed that the pastor who just came in on Sundays to preach would have to do it, although he had never really met these kids very much.

He also was in his 90s at the time, just physically very frail. And I remember just wrestling with all of this and just being disappointed by some of the church traditions that weren't necessarily biblical.

[10 : 29] And while those are such small and insignificant examples, the reality is, as John MacArthur teaches us, by Jesus' day, the tradition of the elders had overshadowed and supplanted God's Word.

Divine truth had been lost, buried under mountains of tradition. And church, this is what we have to be on guard against. Because while traditions can be a great tool in the hands of our Savior, they become a terrible master.

So let me ask you, what's Satan's mission statement? What is his purpose to try to trip you up? What is his purpose? John 10.10, The thief, talking about Satan, comes only to steal, kill, and destroy.

So if he can steal your genuine love and affection for Jesus, if he can kill your desire to get into the Word of God and let God's Word transform your heart, if he can destroy that broken and contrite heart for Jesus that you daily walk in, and if he can replace it with this smug self-righteousness based on extra-biblical traditions and a religious to-do list, while we sneer at everyone else who doesn't meet our man-made criteria, if he can turn us into these Pharisees that we see throughout the New Testament, he's happy.

Because at that point, we're not a threat to the kingdom of darkness anymore. We become more like Satan's undercover agents, masquerading as children of God. And then if we look at Mark 7 and pick back up here in verses 8 and 9, Jesus puts it like this.

[12 : 02] He says, You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions. And he continued, You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions.

So here are these religious leaders of the day, the quote-unquote experts in the law, supposed to be sincere godly men leading the children of Israel.

And Jesus makes it clear that, basically, they've forsaken the very word of God to run after traditions that ultimately, like we talked about earlier, only justified self-centeredness, fueled their self-righteousness, and served their self-interest.

When instead, Jesus gives us these radical commands, like, hey, when you follow Christ, you are actually going to die to self. Or even this one, you're going to pick up a towel, and you're going to wash feet.

You're going to lead through servanthood. Now, when the author, Lloyd C. Douglas, was in college, he lived in a boarding house. And downstairs, on the first floor, lived an elderly, retired music teacher who was confined to a wheelchair.

[13 : 13] And as their friendship grew, each day, Douglas would peek his head into the teacher's room, and he'd say, hey, what's the good news? And every morning, this man would pick up his tuning fork, he'd tap it on the side of his wheelchair, and he'd say, well, that's a middle C.

It was a middle C yesterday, it'll be a middle C tomorrow, and it'll be a middle C in a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs, he said, sings flat, the piano across the hall is out of tune, but that, my friend, is a middle C.

And I'll tell you what, I'll be 40 years old this year. Some of you look at that and say, well, you're just a baby. And others of you think, wow, that's kind of old. And I guess it all just depends on the lenses that you're looking out of today.

But I can tell you, the more I live in this world, the more I've seen morality change just in my lifetime alone. And some of you have seen it change even more because maybe you're a few years older than me.

And the more I see things like kids identifying as cats and wanting litter boxes, true story, even in our community, the more I am just thankful that we have a middle C.

[14:20] We have a constant. The one absolute is the word of God that proclaims Jesus Christ as our God and our Savior. And let me just share a few different passages that help us to understand the role the word needs to play in our lives.

2 Timothy 3, verses 16 and 17, says all Scripture. How much of it? Say that word. All. We don't get to pick and choose. All Scripture is God-breathed.

And it's useful for teaching. Okay, here's the purpose. Teaching. Okay? We live in a culture where, man, there's so much information out there, but we are just not educating ourselves.

So Jesus is going to educate us through the word, okay? He's going to teach us what is right and what is true. And then second, for teaching, then rebuking. Sometimes we get a little big for our spiritual britches and we need a spiritual spanking.

And so Jesus loves us enough to discipline us, so he rebukes us. And then third is correcting. He changes our way of thinking in line with the word of God.

[15:26] And then fourth, he says training in righteousness. Why? So that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. John 8 puts it like this.

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, if you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and what? The truth will set you free.

And then I love 1 Peter 2, verses 2 and 3, where we see what our response to the word of God needs to be. It says, like newborn babies, crave that pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Listen, let's not ever do what these Pharisees in this story did, where we elevate man-made rules or laws or even traditions over the word of God, where our faith is more dependent on a building or a style of music or a preacher or a title that you hold or the way the church has always done it.

Let's not ever be more dependent on those things than we are on the truth of God's word. And the more you get into that word, the more we allow the Holy Spirit to use that word to soften up our hearts as we put our roots down deep in Christ, the more I will draw nearer to Jesus.

[16:42] The more on guard then I'll be against Satan's attacks and I won't allow my heart to run after these man-made things when I have the pure spiritual milk of the word to satisfy my soul.

So hear me. Traditions can be a blessing if they're a tool in the master's hands and not elevated up to or above the word of God. And then here's the second thing I want you to see today.

In empty religion, the outward is more important than the heart. The outward is more important than what's on the inside, more important than the heart. Man, these Pharisees, these scribes could talk the talk.

They looked spiffy in their fancy outfits. They could quote scripture all day. They were smart. They were well-spoken. The people willingly submitted to their leadership. And yet, in Matthew 23-27, Jesus has some piercing and even deafening words for them.

He says, Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You're like whitewashed tombs which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of bones of the dead and everything unclean.

[17:51] And then we even pick up here in Mark 7 where the religious leaders have just kind of interrogated Jesus about why his disciples would dare eat with defiled hands.

And here's Jesus' response back to them in verse 6. He replied, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites. As it is written, these people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.

They worship me in vain. Their teachings are merely human rules. Now, if you're flawed like me and I'm guessing you are because the Bible tells us that we all are, oftentimes when I read something like this I'm tempted to be like, oh snap, Jesus, give it to them baby, yeah!

The way they treated you, Jesus, the way they treated others, man, they had it coming. But then I like to step back and I like to look in the mirror of God's word at my own heart and realize that there can still be Pharisees infiltrating our churches today.

And it can be you and it can be me. And even in the hearts, in hearts that love Jesus, there can be some pharisaical tendencies that have to be laid down at the foot of the cross.

[19 : 02] And today, I think most people listening to my voice are probably followers of Jesus.

That's why you're listening to the word. But even in us, there are some tendencies there that God may want to show us that need to be laid down at the cross so we can look more like Jesus every day and so that our witness, our love, can go out into this world and truly lead others to Christ.

See, I love the excitement of seeing someone come to Jesus with a heart of repentance, a heart just broken over sin, crying out for forgiveness and grace. And then we go down into the baptism waters and we see a new creation in Christ ready to live for Jesus all their days.

And yet sometimes that excitement and that joy and that heart for Christ can easily be replaced by religious duty and church traditions. And that's what we have to be on guard against because in Revelation 2, starting in verse 2, we see Jesus address this same thing in the church in Ephesus. Here's what he says, Revelation 2.2, I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people that you've tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them false.

You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary. See, Jesus says, let me stop there for just a second. He says, I see your good deeds and they're good.

[20 : 27] I see that you're working hard in the church to build the kingdom of God. That's good. I see you don't put up with false doctrine. That's important. That's good. I see that you've persevered through persecution and you didn't give up like some did.

You didn't walk away like some did. You stayed firm, trusting in me. But then look at verse 4. He says, Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken the love you had at first.

Guys, it is so easy. Our natural default mode can be to take this relationship with Jesus Christ where I am daily seeking Him through prayer. Through the Word, through my spiritual disciplines, through the Holy Spirit's leading, through loving and impacting my world for Christ where it's all about just sitting at the feet of Jesus, growing and daily following Him everywhere He leads.

It's so easy to get lazy and fat and sassy in my pursuit of Him that I instead turn my faith into just showing up at a meeting once a week, serving in this ministry, checking boxes that I don't drink, smoke, or chew, or go with women who do.

I put something in the offering plate. I raised my hands in worship. I brought a dessert for the funeral dinner. I got the kids to church. I said amen to make the preacher feel like we're actually listening to the guy.

[21 : 45] And while all those things are good things to do, and from a heart redeemed by Christ will flow these godly fruits, but herein lies the problem.

When I no longer hunger for the Word of God and walk in a relationship with Jesus, when I've replaced a daily walk with Him for a religious to-do list, then I can so easily turn into a Pharisee.

And listen, I think those of us who work in the church who are employed, quote unquote, to be religious, I think we are even more susceptible to this. But the truth is that we all have to be on guard because what can so easily happen is our faith becomes about outward things and a show instead of this pursuit to let Jesus have more and more of my heart as I deny self, as I pick up my cross daily, and as I follow Him.

See, in our passage, Jesus goes on to give them an example of their traditions keeping people from living out God's Word. He talks a little more specifically about some of the dietary restrictions the religious leaders had put in place.

And then we come to verse 21 and verse 22 where we see Jesus talking to His disciples about the fruits of this empty religion. He says, For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly.

[23 : 15] And what He's doing is He's painting this picture of the fruit that was specifically coming from these religious leaders and He's warning us against it because He knows our hearts can go

the same places because I bet you when those Pharisees started out, their hearts were probably in the right place too because if this is the fruit that our quote-unquote religion produces, then it's an empty religion.

And if you fast forward about a year from our story, these are some of the same people who had Jesus crucified on a cross. They killed their Savior. Their empty religion led to murder.

And this is where we've got to look in the mirror. I can't focus on anyone else but me today. I can't worry about Cousin Eddie or whoever. I've got to focus on me because I've got a feeling as we look at this list of fruit from empty religion, every one of us are prone to wander in some of these same directions.

And this is where we have to stop and we've got to remind ourselves to always keep the main thing the main thing. Now going back to Revelation 2 that we read earlier, Jesus gives us this warning to the church and he says, you've forsaken your first love.

Go back and do the things you did at first. You know, when you came to know Jesus. So let me ask you this. Do you remember that heart that wanted to turn away from that empty lifestyle of selfishness and sin?

[24 : 39] Do you remember that desire to go deeper where you couldn't get enough of Jesus through his word? Do you remember that tender and repentant heart to honor Christ? Do you remember your desire to love others and share the life-saving message of Jesus?

Do you remember the excitement that came when you thought about how you could serve the Lord with the gifts he had given you? Just that awe and wonder of being a child of God with assurance of eternal paradise with Jesus?

See, here's the litmus test for us. When we're walking as children of God, we're going to walk in the fruits of the Spirit from Galatians 5.

Verse 22. It says, But the fruit of the Spirit, so this is someone who is genuine, someone who is walking in Christ, who has the Holy Spirit living inside of them, guiding them.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

[25 : 41] Against such things, he says, there is no law. Now, I've got to be honest with you, this passage we've studied today is tough. And honestly, there's some things that hit me between the eyes.

And the reason Jesus comes so strongly here is because he loves us that much that his greatest desire is that we'll walk in the fruits of the Spirit, that we'll never settle for this empty religion, but instead, we'll walk with Jesus every day and someday hear those words we long to hear.

Well done, good and faithful servant. So let me leave you with this, kind of bringing it all back to this series that is all about what does it look like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Well, it's really this simple. A disciple of Jesus does not elevate man-made traditions above the Word of God and a disciple of Jesus is more concerned with having a heart that beats for the Lord than just putting on a show on the outside for others to see.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we just thank you for these words of life that you have spoken into our hearts today. And I'm so thankful for this passage that's hard, that's tough, that may have come across a little bit strong, but Jesus, that's how you chose to speak these words.

[27 : 03] And I pray, as hard as sometimes they can be to hear, that our hearts will be receptive to hear your words, to give over to you whatever it is we need to give over to you, and then trust you and follow you more faithfully.

So God, we're thankful for these words of life, and we just pray that you will store our hearts and make us more like you, Jesus, every single day. We love you and we give you praise, Jesus.

In your name we pray. Amen and amen. Hey, let me give you this invitation this morning. If you are listening on the radio and, or maybe even online, and you hear this message and God is just stirring your heart, maybe it's causing you to have some questions that you just have about what it means to follow Jesus or about the Christian faith, maybe you're ready to say, Jesus, I want to follow you with all my heart, and God is just like knocking on the door of your heart and you feel him just moving and saying, child, come home.

I love you. It's time for you to walk as a child of the King. And so, regardless of what you may need to talk about, reach out to us. We would love to help you.

My name is Ray Sweet. I'm the lead pastor here at First Christian Church of Greensburg, Indiana. You can email me at ray at fccgreensburg.com. You can call our church office Monday through Thursday between 8 and 430, 812-663-8488.

[28 : 33] Once again, 812-663-8488. And we'd be glad to just sit down and talk with you, come alongside you like so many others have done for us as we have grown every day in our faith.

So, hey, God bless you and keep serving Jesus.