

Rev. Dr. Niveen Sarras  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23  
September 2, 2018

I attended two conservative schools other than ELCA seminaries: Bethlehem Bible College, a non-denominational school and the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, a Presbyterian seminary. These two schools prevent students from drinking alcohol, listening to secular songs, dancing, watching TV, or playing cards, etc. They believe that these activities ruin the moral uprightness of the seminarians.

It is interesting to learn that the Bible does not tell us to avoid these activities. Prohibiting these practices is the product of the human beings, not Jesus Christ. Maybe you say that these activities were not practiced in Jesus' time except drinking alcohol. Here, I recall Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 10:23 "All things are lawful," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up."

Many Evangelical Christians are legalistic. They believe they need to sound and look "religious" in order to avoid conforming to the world. They create rules for themselves and others to show their righteousness. This was the intention of the Pharisees and scribes who came to Jesus criticizing his disciples for eating without washing their hands. Washing hands was a traditional practice instituted by the rabbis. This tradition is not found in the Torah. Only priests had to wash their hands before they offered sacrifices (Exodus 30:20-21). The Pharisees and scribes do not talk about hygiene but about ceremonial purity. Jesus rejects the tradition of the elders because it has nothing to do with God's commandments.

What is the source of the Pharisees and scribes' law? The Jews believe that God gave Moses at Mount Sinai two kinds of laws: the written law as we have it in the Torah and the oral law that represents laws and legal interpretations that were not recorded in the Torah. Rabbis wrote down the oral law that became the Mishna and Talmud. Mishna is a part of the Talmud. The Jews consider this tradition to be fully authoritative. The Pharisees and scribes do not accuse the disciples of breaking the law of the Torah but breaking the law of the Mishna/ oral law.

Jesus rejects their teaching, or he rejects the oral law, the Talmud, and Mishna. Jesus accuses the Pharisees and scribes of "abandoning the commandment of God and hold to human tradition" (Mark 7:8). Jesus tells his disciples "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (v. 15). In saying so, Jesus is abandoning the commandment of God that relates to kosher food. "Kosher foods are those that conform to the Jewish dietary regulations of *kashrut* (dietary law), primarily derived from Leviticus and Deuteronomy."<sup>i</sup>

Comment [G1]: Inserted: ,

What was the purpose of this story? "More likely, Mark uses the episode as a whole to defend the church's claim that the purity laws of the OT are no longer binding on believers, since they have been fulfilled in Christ."<sup>ii</sup> However, some Christian denominations have condemned makeup, jewelry, wearing jeans in church or even own a television! The apostle Paul warns us of legalism in Colossians 2:20-23: "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!'"?

“Legalism means elevating human traditions to the level of God’s law. The religious leaders had made ritual washings mandatory and criticized Jesus’ disciples for not practicing them.”<sup>iii</sup> A legalist usually expresses a critical and unloving attitude toward others who do not adopt his/her principles. They readily condemn people and identify them as "the outsiders," but they identify themselves as righteous.

My friends do not fall into the legalistic spirit but walk with the grace of God. In doing so, you will experience joy in your heart. Your heart overflows with gratitude and praise. Legalism destroys your joy and makes you miserable. You cannot earn your salvation through your deeds. So, enjoy Christ salvation. His salvation is enough for you. You cannot earn God's love because God already loves you. Some might say that legalism has nothing to do with our salvation but it is a sign of our sanctification. The Holy Spirit sanctifies you. It is the work of God, not yours.

Legalism is a form of spiritual abuse. It is a trap that we need to avoid. So, make sure you remain in the grace of God. “When you walk in grace, the Spirit will lead you to dress and act in a way that honors Him [God].”<sup>iv</sup> The Holy Spirit will help you to discern the kind of movie you watch and the kind of song you listen. The Holy Spirit will give you the gift of discernment to help you to live your life praising the Lord Jesus and to embrace his grace.

---

<sup>i</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kosher\\_foods](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kosher_foods)

---

<sup>ii</sup> Strauss, Mark L.; Strauss, Mark L.. *Mark* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament) (Kindle Locations 7661-7663). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iv</sup> J. Lee Grady, “8 Signs of a Legalistic Spirit—and How to Break Free,” *Charisma Magazine*, 12/3/2014.