

Moralism, and Christianity  
Matthew 23:23-28

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

You know, I don't always decide what I'm going to preach for the Lord's Day.

I'm not saying that I at any time just 'wing it' without study throughout the week, without previous thought or preparation. What I'm saying is that sometimes others (in a sense) decide what I'm going to preach. There are times when some of you have questions to which you earnestly desire the Bible's answer. And as Paul said to the Ephesian elders, so I say, in this light, 'I do not shrink from declaring to you anything that is helpful' (*Acts 20:20*).

For at least one of you, it has been seen as helpful that I address a most important subject that, in fact, every Christian should consider.

The subject is this: *What is the difference between Moralism and Christianity?*

In perhaps too quick an answer, the difference is night and day, black and white, although to some it might, in fact, be gray.

The difference is like buying imitation leather sneakers in contrast to genuine leather sneakers. I once bought a pair of imitation leather sneakers. Once. The label on the sneaker said 'genuine imitation leather.' (I kid you not. I wasn't concerned about the quality, at that time, I just needed a new pair, and being on a college budget, cheaper was better). But that's an interesting label, isn't it? Genuine imitation leather. I.e., what was genuine was the imitation, not the leather; the leather was genuine ingenuity.

And as someone said to me when I showed them my ridiculous new sneakers, 'You call those sneakers?', so we could say of Moralism, 'You call that Christianity?!'

To some of you, 'Moralism' is a new word. Moralism is a lifestyle governed by an ethical code of behavior by which one gains approval before God. It is doing what one should and not doing what one should not do. It involves good habits, decency, and commendable character traits.

And to help you understand something of Moralism, I brought the moralist's Bible (hold up William Bennett's 'The Book of Virtues').

Some of you may be new to the idea of Moralism. Still others may not have a clear picture of what Christianity is either.

And so to give you the basic difference, we'll not use this 'Bible' (Book of Virtues). We'll use this Bible (God's Word).

To put it simply: Moralism is one directing Himself toward God for acceptance, whereas Christianity is God inclining Himself toward sinners to accept them in Jesus Christ.

But there's more to consider than just this brief - but still, useful - summary.

Matthew 23 is the most succinct, direct, and convicting teaching in answer to that question. It is there that the Apostle Matthew recorded our Lord's stinging rebukes to the greatest Moralists this planet has ever seen. And by looking at them, we can learn much about what a Moralist is.

According to Matthew 23, *the moralist is concerned to be noticed by others.* (23:5; cf. 6:1).

Again, according to Matthew 23, *the moralist is utterly despised by the Lord Jesus.* Notice the graphic, scathing terms Jesus used against these people. They are 'hypocrites' (v.13), 'blind guides' (vv.16, 24), 'fools' and 'blind men' (vv.17, 19), 'sons of those who murdered the prophets' (v.31), and 'sons of hell' (v.15). Our Lord reserved His sternest rebuke for this type of person, because He utterly despises the moralist.

Still again, according to Matthew 23, *the moralist receives a solemn judgment.* The Lord pronounced a sevenfold 'woe,' a pronouncement of eternal damnation, upon the scribes and Pharisees (vv.13,15,16,23,25,27,29). Jesus said of the moralistic Pharisees, 'you do not enter in [to the kingdom of heaven]' (v.13). 'How will you escape the judgment of hell?' (v.33). The moralist receives a solemn judgment.

And so hearing these initial cautions, I want us seriously to consider what the difference is between Moralism and Christianity. And we'll do that by comparing Moralism to Jesus' words to the moralists (the Pharisees) at Matthew 23.

We could say:

*The moralist gives attention to some aspects of law but neglects others (vv.23-24)*

Notice it from the text...v.23...

God mandated that the entirety of His law be kept (Deuteronomy 27:26 with Galatians 3:10). (James 2:10). Psalm 119:6 speaks of looking on 'all [God's] commandments.' You would think that the Pharisees had done that! But the Pharisees were not fine examples of keeping biblical law, contrary to what many might think on the surface. Instead, they were 'experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep their tradition.' The result was that they 'invalidated the word of God' by the tradition they 'handed down' (*Mark 7:9, 13*). They were not particular about the written Law of God. They were particular about the minutia of commentary added to the Law; their oral tradition and rabbinic commentary. Like the butcher who squeezes meat through a processor, so the Pharisees squeezed God's Law through their tradition and came out with something shaped much different than that with which they began. They were not law keepers, but law twisters; and thus, law breakers. They were masters at neglecting the law under the guise of obedience.

The moralist gives attention to some aspects of law to the neglect of others. Often, he focuses on particular, insignificant features of it. And as he does that he misses the main, overarching principle. In the classic metaphor, he misses the forest for the trees. He majors on the minors and minors on the majors. He places great weight on what in the light of the big picture is rather insignificant.

Look at these Pharisees – tithing mint, dill, and cummin. Luke was more complete and said they tithed 'every kind of garden herb' (*Luke 11:42*). Look at them with the tiniest of leaves! The totality of their herb garden foliage in their *hands*. They're not particularly large items. It's like a man carefully weighing the lint from all the pockets of his clothes. It's like a farmer counting every ear of corn and every kernel on every ear in his vat. Is it really that significant? Does one's part in his hair have to be ruler straight, with no hairs lying over the line? Need the Pharisee tithes on his mint leaves, dill sprouts, rue, and cummin with precise exactness?

Now to be sure, the Law did command the tithe; giving a tenth of all your produce or income (*see Deuteronomy 12:5-19 or 14:22-29*). Yet, the Law never spoke to small herbs. Cattle, yes. Flocks, yes. Corn, yes. Grapes, yes. Herbs – mint, dill, cummin, rue? Not specified in any detail. But the Pharisees, being the moralists they were, made sure this base was covered. To them it was a weighty matter. God was to be given what God is due. And not only that, but their own righteousness was at stake. So they divided up all their herbs and gave God ten percent of them.

But while they were being particular about herb, they were omitting other key commands – justice (Psalm 37:28)...mercy (cf. Micah 6:6)...faithfulness (or, faith per Habakkuk 2:4)...

Cf. Matthew 22:37-40 with 23:23 re the ‘law’ of justice, mercy and faithfulness...

Jesus said their tithing herb was acceptable. The problem was not that tithing herbs was in itself sinful, the problem was that their narrow, perspicuous, tunnel-vision approach to it kept them from the weighty, obvious, more important and central aspects of the law – like ‘justice, mercy, and faithfulness’ (v.23).

The moralist gives attention to some aspects of law to the neglect of others, and almost always, the significant aspects of it that speak to godly character. The moralist strains out the gnat, but swallows the camel. He is simply surprising in his sacrifice of godly character on the altar of picayune duty.

Calvin said, ‘It is evident that hypocrites amuse themselves with such distinctions; for while they pass by judgment, mercy, and faith, and even tear in pieces the whole Law, they are excessively rigid and severe in matters that are of no great importance; and while in this way they pretend to kiss the feet of God, they proudly spit in His face.’

Do you know why Moralism fails?

*Moralism fails because it defines morality and goodness personally* (that is, according to self-preference or choice).

*Moralism also because it defines morality and goodness comparatively* (that is, according to whatever standard one can achieve...Cf. grading on the curve, but then there is Jesus).

In addition, *Moralism fails because it defines morality and goodness proportionally*. It leads to the thinking that a 'good' cancels out a 'bad'.

Furthermore, the 'law' that the moralist pursues may be biblical law. It may be purely human law. It may be a mixture of the two, which was the case of the Pharisees. And God, who Himself said, 'You shall not add to nor take away from' His law (*Deuteronomy 4:2*) will not in anyway approve the moralist, for he always weighs more heavily on the side of the law that favors man-made or man-centered traditions.

Such was the case for the Pharisees. They rejected Jesus – sought to murder Jesus – because He did not observe the Sabbath according to the narrow view of the Sabbath. They disliked him because He associated with tax collectors, drunkards, and sinners. They disliked His disciples because they did not wash their hands according to the tradition of the elders.

In our passage, Jesus found fault with the Pharisees. But it was not because of what they did, so much as what they *did not*. They tithed herbs – good! But they did not display godly character, that which is the fruit of the Spirit, a transformed godly life.

Would you consider yourself a moralist?

Do you look down upon others because they do not meet the standard of things you deem important, although not prescribed in Scripture?

Is your approach to God based on law, on things you do; that if you do 'such and such' thing (or things) God will accept and approve you? Or, if you do NOT do 'such and such other things,' God will accept or approve you?

On what basis should God approve you?

Because you try to live an exemplary life?

Because you keep some of the Ten Commandments?

Because you try to be a good person?

Because you have not committed any scandalous sins?

Because you refrain from...?

Christians know that the answer to those questions is 'no.' They know Moralism does not make them acceptable to God.

But even we who are Christians have to be careful. In fact, we need to hear the goaded words of one commentator on Zen, Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity. He has pinpointed the presence of Moralism within modern Christianity quite well, to our own rebuke:

It seems as long as we're sin-conscious enough, we can identify ourselves as Christians. A good friend of mine, a minister, used to do a funny imitation of

the "holiness movement" of his boyhood. Screwing his face into a righteous scowl, he'd declare, "Bless God, I don't swear, drink, smoke, spit or chew or go with those who do, and I don't play cards, dance or go to movies!" Conversely, we could add the positives: "I go to church regularly, tithe, vote for every "family-values" legislation I've been told is right, and even my minivan is sanctified by a chrome fish."

(<http://www.yakrider.com/christianity/Christianity.htm>)

This writer was not so much nitpicking on particular practices of Christians, so much as we was revealing an attitude – a self-righteous attitude of those who, like the Pharisees, 'trusted in themselves as righteous and viewed others with contempt' (*Luke 18:9*). There were Moralists in the Church in Jesus' day (the Pharisees). There are Moralists in the Christian Church today.

Are you a Moralist, or are you a Christian?

To go deeper, to a practical level, we could envision certain scenarios:

A husband getting on wife's case about dishes not done, but yet oblivious to the frustrating day she's had...(nitpicking without mercy)

A parent who harshly chastens his child oblivious to the fact that the reason is because he can't find his shoe – even after genuine attempts in desperation (neglect of mercy)

The refrain that characterizes the moralist, ironically, is 'neglect, neglect, neglect!' In even the most studious attention of the moralist, he overlooks the most significant features.

And so the moralist gives attention to some aspects of law but neglects other, more important ones. He majors on minor laws of outward practice while neglecting other laws about internal attitude that will bring forth godly character and practice in fulfillment of the law of love.

And this leads to a second feature of the moralist, and what Jesus said about it:

*The moralist gives attention to external righteousness to the neglect of internal cleanliness (vv.25-28)*

Somewhat similar to the former, but Jesus revealed a distinction. Note the contrast between external and internal, appearance and reality, from the text, vv.25-28:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. <sup>26</sup>  
"You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the

outside of it may become clean also. <sup>27</sup> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. <sup>28</sup> "So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

A basic (but fatal) underpinning of the moralist is that man is essentially good, and not depraved or sinful. Or if he is sinful, it is not to the extent taught by the Bible. And since the moralist begins to think about himself as good, he simply needs a moral code to follow which will be the means whereby he can earn his acceptance with God.

Here again, *Moralism fails because it wrongly uses God's law*. It uses the law as a means to being in the right before God (i.e., justification). See 1 Timothy 1:7-10...

Moralists are:

wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions. <sup>8</sup> But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, <sup>9</sup> realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers <sup>10</sup> and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching (*1 Tim.* 1:7-10)

Moralism fails to understand the proper use of law.

*The proper use of law is to expose the presence of sin (Romans 3:20; 7:7).*

Another proper use of [God's law] is to explain the need for Christ (Romans 10:4; Galatians 3:24).

Does one clean only the outside of used dishes and cups? Surely not. But the moralist has regard for only the outer aspect of his being. He does not see that his inside is dirty – filthy – from sin.

Does one wash his hands to remove cancer? Surely not. But the moralist misregards – or worse, disregards – his polluted condition, and instead seeks another remedy than Christ and His means of salvation. The moralist sees no need for a righteous Savior to die in the place of a sinner to remove the guilt, penalty, and pollution of sin.

In biblical times, a whitewashed tomb warned of uncleanness (and so, was itself seen as beautiful). Yet underneath and inside is uncleanness.

So, the Pharisees then and all moralists today. They are whitewashed by a façade of righteousness, but are unclean within. They may warn of uncleanness in one way, yet are unclean underneath. Just as the whited stone covers the decomposition of the corpse, so the righteous show of the Pharisee and moralist covers a depraved heart dead in sin.

It is right to *be* pure, not merely to appear pure.

So the moralist gives attention to some aspects of law but neglects other, more weighty aspects. He also gives attention to an external righteousness without internal cleanness which comes only from the saving work of Jesus Christ. Those are the key differences between Moralism and Christianity.

But some implications should be noted. If this is the dough, we need to throw in some leaven to make it rise.

#### *Key implications of Moralism and Christianity*

The morality that is acceptable before God comes from a heart first and thoroughly cleansed by grace and faith (*v.26; Hebrews 9:13-14; Titus 2:14; 3:5*)

The Christian life is lived in the power of the Spirit, not in the weakness of the flesh (*Galatians 3:2-3*)

The nurture and discipline of our children must engage the sinfulness of their hearts, and not merely address the wrongs of their behavior (*Proverbs 23:26 with 4:4*)

Our prayers should be that God would show us the uncleanness of our own vessels, and our constant need of Christ

Christianity is more than merely a worldwide religion. It is more than a religion founded on the life and teachings of Jesus. At its heart, Christianity speaks of a relationship; a relationship between a holy God and redeemed sinners; a relationship made possible only by Jesus Christ, sent by God to earn righteousness by an obedient life, to remove by His own death sin's penalty of death, and to give everlasting righteousness, the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life to all who turn from their sin and rely on Him as their only Savior from the judgment of God.

That's what Christianity is about, at its core. Christianity is about a living relationship with the living God through the risen Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the believer is then enabled to do good deeds that please God.

It is about loving the unlovable in the midst of their unlovableness. It is not about standing in judgment over them with our self-righteous sandals upon their necks.

Moralism posits that you have to achieve a certain level of morality in order to be accepted by God. And this, is an occasion to boast before others, look down upon others, and view them with contempt.

In today's Church, that line is not merely blurred, but it has come to the point where Moralism itself passes for Christianity. And it would nice to say that it passes as such in the thinking of the world, but sadly, it passes as such in the Church! It's come to the point where people have been so malnourished on a flaky version of Christianity that they have lost sight of the real purpose of law and the real need for Christ.

I don't intend to ever buy genuine imitation leather sneakers any time soon.

And don't you buy the genuine imitation Christianity.

Buy the truth, as it is in Christ, and sell it not.