

When a Religious Spirit Goes Too Far

"When He had called all the people to Him, He said, 'Listen to Me, every one of you, and understand: There is nothing from outside a man that by entering him can defile him. But the things which come out of the man are what defile him'" (Mark 7:14-15).

Several years ago, the orthodox in Jerusalem threatened to burn down the new McDonald's if it served cheeseburgers. Why?

It had to do with the law of kosher (clean and unclean)—the dietary laws established in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14.

Certain animals, fish and insects could not be eaten, and even the animals permitted were to be killed in a specified way.

Deuteronomy 14:21 instructs: "You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk." The interpretation flowing out of this prohibition means that in eating, you never mix a dairy with a meat product. Thus, if you are dining in a hotel in Israel or in an observant Jewish home, you will not have butter with your bread or cream with your coffee because meat is on the menu. Creative substitutes take the place of dairy products.

Is there anything wrong with observing kosher? Not at all. These dietary laws have helped the Jewish people maintain their identity over millennia of dispersion in the countries of the world. Where today are the Hittites, the Jebusites or the other "-ites" of the Bible? They morphed into other cultural identities, but the Jewish people retained their identity through diet and ritual, and by God's keeping.

So, if kosher is OK—why does Jesus set it aside?

His religious critics had a false view of what pleases God.

They performed their outward religious duties with corrupt hearts. Jesus taught that righteousness before God was first a matter of inward disposition. If your attitudes, your thinking, your desires are wrong—then you can't make things right by performing religious rituals.

I came across a young college girl working the switchboard at her Christian campus. She was crying. I was her campus pastor, and I asked, "What's wrong?" She sobbed that an older lady had just come by and reamed her out because her skirt came only to her knees. The girl's dress was not immodest in any way. I replied, "The next time that woman comes around, tell her that you will lengthen your skirt if she will shorten her tongue."

I think that's the point Jesus was making here. Legalism always wants sharply defined rules and, over time, these rules become more important than anything else.

We face the same issue with the tendency to "dress-down" now occurring in many of our churches. I personally like to wear a suit and tie to church. What happens, though, when pastors—in an attempt to create a welcoming atmosphere for the unsaved and their own parishioners—wear more casual clothes to the pulpit? Some of the saints don't hear the sermon because they're upset with the clothes. Do some pastors get carried away with trying to be "relevant"? Certainly! But the opposite is also true—we can get carried away with trying to be "traditional."

Let's take Jesus' words to heart and truly listen. He is more concerned with a kosher heart than a kosher diet.

A Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to guard my own heart so that what comes out of me is pleasing to You.

Excerpted from Dr. Wood's book, Fearless: How Jesus Changes Everything, available from Vital Resources.