



Speaker:  
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## The False and the True

Series: The Gospel of Mark · 22 of 22

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We're moving into the seventh chapter of Mark's gospel today, and we're reading the first 13 verses.

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The Pharisees are at it again. They've travelled a long way for the single purpose of finding fault in the speech or behaviour of Jesus of Nazareth. They don't want to be proven wrong. Their minds have long since been made up. This man was a fraud, and he needed to go.

What was it this time? Another crime against the Sabbath, perhaps? No; this was about the disciples not washing their hands before they ate. It wasn't quite the same as your mum telling you to *Get those filthy hands washed before your dinner!*

Among the hundreds of regulations they'd invented, there were a few about washing. For example, they'd wash after coming into contact with Gentiles, as if they'd become polluted spiritually by brushing against them in the market or something!

Verses 3 and 4 are a kind of parenthesis. Mark, as it were, turns to the reader to explain what the practice of the Jews was. They were always washing themselves, all kinds of household items, and even their furniture. Remember: this wasn't about being clean and tidy. This was about ritual purification. That Mark takes the time to explain this shows us again that his gospel account was aimed at a non-Jewish audience.

I should just make a comment on this practice of invoking *Corban*. It's quite obvious that a young person has a duty of care towards his parents. If they're too old to work, or are prevented by illness or infirmity, it's expected that their children will help them out as they're able. However, if for whatever reason the son or daughter wanted to avoid that responsibility, they could declare that any financial help they would've given to their parents would now be dedicated to God instead. *I'm sorry, Mum and Dad, but I can't help you out. I've dedicated my money to the work of God.* Now it might not surprise you to learn that the money didn't always end up going to the work of God! You could just declare Corban and keep all your money to spend on yourself. It was a sinful practice, and one the Pharisees didn't discourage.

Jesus's rebuke of the Pharisees on this occasion provides us with an opportunity to examine the faults, not of the disciples, but of the Pharisees and all who follow in their ways. In verse 6, it says the people honour God with their lips, but their hearts are far from him. So firstly, I intend to consider their false profession. In verse 7, it's said they worship God in vain. So secondly, I intend to look at their false worship. And in verse 8, they're accused of laying

aside the commandments of God and following the commandments of men instead. So finally, we'll consider their false doctrine.

## False profession

By "profession", we're not referring to their jobs, of course. This profession means *what someone professes to believe*. What they **say** they believe in. So if someone professes to belong to God but doesn't, their profession is false.

Jesus quotes from the prophecies of Isaiah. The prophet's warning was aimed at a backslidden Israel. But here, Jesus wields it against the Pharisees. He's showing that Isaiah's description fits all those who claimed to be God's children but who are not.

In Christendom today there are just as many false professors. You're unlikely to find a gathering of professing believers that doesn't contain some weeds among God's true plants. They're people who profess to know Jesus Christ but are still in their sin.

The reason the Jews were able to draw near to God with their lips at all was because of their religious upbringing. They were taught the right things to say and the right things to do. But that's all their religious instructors could do. They couldn't change hearts. That takes a miracle of God's grace.

It's for this reason that I've always believed the most fertile ground for producing false professors is, ironically, the Christian family. No one receives more religious instruction in the things of the Bible than the child of a Christian home. Now we know some children of believers react strongly against their upbringing, and deliberately go full steam ahead into rebellion. And we know others grow up to be genuine believers on Jesus Christ.

But there's a third class. They want to please their parents and the people in their church circles. Every time they do or say something Christian-like, they received affirmation. And they like being told they're doing well. So they continue. Parents and church leaders strike while the iron's hot, and often give these young people positions of responsibility. And some of these will go on to become leaders in churches. All the while, they don't know Christ. Their hearts are far from him. The danger is entire churches can be ruled by accomplished fakers. Ideally, churches would be governed by those who came from Christian homes *and* those who came from non-Christian backgrounds.

If nothing else, it'd provide for a diversity of life experience and hopefully make the church a more welcome place for enquirers.

False professions abound. In Proverbs 20:6 it says, "Most men will proclaim every one his own goodness: but a faithful man who can find?"

What, then, is a *true* profession?

The most important principle is that the only one who can make a sincere profession is he who has been made the object of God's saving grace. A true profession must come from a new heart. A profession is only real if the faith it claims to own is also real.

Faith is a heart matter, but its profession is outwardly expressed—firstly through words:

- We're to confess Jesus as our Lord and saviour to as many as will hear it, to believers and unbelievers alike
- We tell them we wholeheartedly believe we have a stake in Calvary
- We tell them about the greatness of our sin and the greatness of our saviour
- And we tell them not only with great joy and enthusiasm but with a sense of gravity.

Luke 12:8–9 KJV says, "...Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God: But he that denieth me before men shall be denied before the angels of God."

And our profession is expressed, secondly, through works:

- In our baptism, we make a declaration to the hosts of heaven and all people present that we are nailing our colours to the mast of God's ship. Having water applied to us is a representation for all to see that the *Holy Spirit* has applied himself to us and made us new creations in Christ.
- In breaking bread together, it's said we're proclaiming the Lord's death. That is, we're proclaiming he is the very bread of heaven who came down to give life to men.
- And our profession extends to all our actions. Because God's word tells us that our very behaviour in day-to-day life informs people about our profession.

So we've said something about false and true professions of faith. Let's move onto our second point.

## False worship

Jesus tells the Pharisees their worship was **vain**. Pointless. And it wasn't a waste of time only because their religious practices had become distorted through tradition. **Their worship was unacceptable to God because their hearts were not right**. This criticism was especially pointed because it was one of their own prophets being quoted from.

Some people think the religion of the Hebrews was merely about performing rituals. But that's not right. Even the ancients were told they must love God and love others. And they were meant to see in all their Law and in all the prophets the coming Messiah who they were to have faith in—to be able to say like Job, *I know that my redeemer lives*.

(Proverbs 15:8) "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer of the upright is his delight." The problem of course is these Pharisees wouldn't have read this proverb and concluded it applied to them! But the principle's there. **If you are one who makes a false profession, it invalidates all your worship**. All your prayers ignored. All your songs of praise despised. All the while the false professor goes about his business in life and worship, there is this elephant in the room. His heart remains black, and his spirit is in rebellion against God.

Having said all this, believers in our day shouldn't be complacent. Now you know what I believe. All our acceptance by God is on account of our union with Jesus Christ. I've sinned today. And I've asked God to forgive me and help me do better. And because of God's amazing grace, I have the confidence that my salvation is secure.

But I can still displease God. Not just through sinful actions or thoughts, either. It's possible some aspects of my *worship* are not right. I may from time to time utter prayers with a heart that is for a time overtaken with unbelief, and I shouldn't expect God to pay them much attention.

You and I need to be careful. Rather than relying on prescribed forms of worship, or practices we've had handed to us by our Christian peers, we should always be ready to re-evaluate every aspect of our worship and see it conforms to the word of God.

But out there, in the Christian world, there are practices which to me are clearly erroneous.

- We see churches where the word of God is in the background, replaced by more singing
- We see churches that are trying to conform to Old Testament practices rather than enjoying the liberty found in Christ
- We see churches where people have visual and auditory hallucinations, assuming them to be manifestations of God

We could go on. But let's never arrogantly look down on others who do things in a different way, assuming ours is the "proper" way. We should show diligence in making sure our worship conforms to the Bible, and show charity towards those who do things differently. Engage with them if you feel it's appropriate. Gently expose them to different ways of thinking. And pray that the Lord would help them and us.

Having said a bit about false worship, are there any guidelines in scripture to help us understand what constitutes *true* worship? We might think of it in terms of the inclusion of the whole Trinity. For example, we aim our prayers at the Father. But these are done *in the name* of Jesus Christ and *through* the Holy Spirit.

What this means is we need to be in a relationship with all three persons of the Trinity for our worship to be acceptable before we even consider modes of worship.

- The true worshipper must have God as his Father. And only those who have been born again are truly children of God the Father.
- The true worshipper must also be united to Christ. They must count him as their Redeemer and understand that acceptance is all through him.
- And the true worshipper must possess the Holy Spirit. He needs to have been subjected to that inward work whereby the Spirit makes his home in him.

Listen to what it says in Philippians 3:3. "For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus..."

Psalms 96:8-9 say, "Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name: bring an offering, and come into his courts. O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth." True worship will only be accepted from a being that is holy, and the only way a man or woman can **be** made holy in the sight of God is by receiving the righteousness of Jesus.

As for worship practices, I only have time to reiterate that our worship must conform to God's revealed word. What that means is:

- When we sing, we're to ensure the doctrine of our songs is sound and that we sing from the heart.

- When we pray together, we're to align our prayers as far as possible with what God has revealed, and give due prominence to honouring God and acknowledging our sins.
- When we testify to others, we're to do it with a sense of soberness, and not be fearful of telling people the truth.
- And for those who are called to preach the word of God to his people, our duty is to be faithful to the word and ensure Jesus Christ is lifted up in all we preach.

We've looked at false and true professions. We've looked at false and true worship. And now we come to our final point.

## False doctrine

Jesus's accusation was the word of God had been set aside for the sake of rules made by men. We mentioned the example he used already. The care of your family was enshrined in God's holy law, but a rule created by the Pharisees allowed a man to be free from that responsibility.

This wouldn't be the first time Jesus challenged them about the distortion and perversion of God's Law. He said they criticized others for small faults while having bigger faults themselves. Some would strain their drinks to avoid accidentally swallowing a fly. Creeping things were forbidden as food, but as was their habit, the Jews took this to a ridiculous extreme. Yet while they took care about these small observances, they were guilty of serious breaches of the Law.

Think about how false doctrines arise in this world:

- Some doctrines are outright inventions. Mohammed, in creating his new religion, took elements from Judaism, Roman Catholicism, paganism and even Christianity. So he had access to God's truth, but decided instead to invent a huge amount of new doctrine.
- Some false doctrines come about through misinterpretation of scripture. Rome, for example, took Jesus's words "this is my body" literally, and came up with transubstantiation.
- Some of these false doctrines appear because principles are taken too far. The Jews reasoned that if the priests had to ritually wash the items in the temple, they too should wash their possessions in a similar way. Hence Jesus's criticism of them ritually washing pots and pans, etc.
- We might argue that some false doctrine comes about because of imbalances. Protestants have, in the past, sacrificed the principle of Christian love for the sake of purity of worship. This is how we ended up with the sad situation where nonconformist Christians were persecuted by fellow Protestants, sometimes even being put to death.

It wouldn't be unfair to say all the troubles, schisms, persecutions and heresies committed by professing Christians are due to a manhandling of God's truth. They get an idea. They recommend it. Then they insist on it. And finally, they harass all who refuse to conform. Inevitably, their principles end up becoming more important to them than scripture itself.

Western Protestantism today isn't immune from this tendency. In our country, we've suffered from the leftovers of a Victorian morality that insisted on details and neglected love for the brethren. Some of these Protestant traditions are held to be so important, it's believe salvation depends on them.

We can have some very strange priorities when looking for a place to worship at. One of my faults in this regard used to be about Bible versions. I started my Christian life in an environment where it was believed you could assess the spiritual state of another congregation by the version of the Bible they read. When looking for a new place to worship, my first questions were not *Do they preach the gospel faithfully? Do they magnify the name of Jesus Christ? Is the Holy Spirit's presence in the hearts of the people evident by their love for one another?* No. I started with *What Bible version do they use?*

And in other people too there are strange priorities. A man told me only the other week he wouldn't ever come to New Road Church because I didn't preach each week about conspiracies. (Which is funny, because I do believe in all sorts of conspiracies. But I'm here to preach Christ, not get involved in exposing governments and evil corporations.)

It's okay for a person to have a mental list of things they want in a new church. All I'm saying is they should have the sort of priorities I outlined a moment ago. And if they find they have a few decent churches to choose from, they can then move on to those other criteria.

So now we've talked a bit about faulty doctrines and beliefs among Christians, Jews and others, we'll conclude with a few comments about what constitutes true doctrine. Good doctrine.

We don't want the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. We don't want the doctrine of Balaam. We don't want the doctrine of devils. **We need the doctrine of Christ.** His doctrine is so powerful, it caused hearers to be amazed. His doctrine came from heaven itself. And he taught doctrine to his Apostles and other followers. And he further caused some of these people to write down his doctrines.

And here we have it. The Bible. This is where we get our doctrine from: from the Bible's history, its Law, its prophecies, its gospel accounts and its letters. This is why I encourage you to read it, and be familiar with it. I regret not having done this more myself. I pray to God that he'd help me to pay it more attention and thereby refine my understanding so that I hold to the exact same doctrines as Jesus Christ did.

Doctrine is important. I wish the modern church would take it more seriously. Some speak of it in a dismissive way. Doctrine is a gift of God. We should receive it with thanks.

Our doctrine, like our profession of faith and our worship, should have Christ at its centre. The only reason we *have* a profession is because of him. The only reason our worship is acceptable to God is because of him. And so as we learn doctrines together, we should always try to refer them back to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Colossians 3:16-17 says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him."

Amen.