

**The Memoirs of Peter
Tradition! (Part 3)**

Mark 7:1-13

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It is truly amazing how much something can change from its original nature. When I think about that, I specifically think of a number of American institutions that were begun for wonderful Christian purposes, who now are bastions of liberalism and atheism and everything that you can imagine that is anti-God.

Take Harvard, for example; now, know I'm not picking on one of our new members who graduated from there, but Harvard College was founded in 1636 by a small group of English Puritan ministers. It was their first school of higher learning in America. And the express purpose of these English Puritans was to train successors to pastor their churches. This is captured on a brick wall just outside the Johnston Gate at Harvard. Listen to what's there: "After God had carried us safe to New England, and we had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God's worship, and settled the civil government, one of the next things we longed for and looked after, was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity, dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust." So Harvard was begun to train a new generation of ministers of the gospel who would carry on the tradition.

On September 26, 1642, Harvard published a pamphlet that sort of set forth the rules for all those students who would attend the institution. This is what it said: "Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well the main end of his life and studies, is to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning. And seeing the Lord only giveth wisdom, let everyone seriously set himself by prayer and secret to seek it of Him."

Compare that amazing statement, really, with the current state of Harvard University. Perhaps the contrast can best be illustrated in the views of one of the campus chaplains at Harvard College, an Episcopal priest named Peter Gomes. Gomes who also serves as the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard Divinity School, he's been preaching there at Harvard for nearly 30 years. This, in spite of the fact that Gomes is openly gay, and calls for (quote) "tolerance of all sexuality as a gift from God." Gomes says (quote), "I can handle a God who has room for me and room for thousands of other conceptions of religious faith of which I know nothing and which I cannot understand. I don't want God to conform to, or be conformed to the limits of my mind and the limits of my tradition. That would not be a God, that would be an icon."

In his 1996 best-selling book, “The Good Book,” Gomes makes an appeal for people to take the Bible seriously – that sounds like a good thing. But in the book, he states that, 1) the doctrine of sola scriptura has created a temptation to make the Bible (quote), “a domesticated substitute for the authority of God.” I don’t know exactly what that means. 2) He says the Bible is actually silent on the question of abortion, and, 3) (quote) “There is no credible case against homosexuality or homosexuals that can be made from the Bible, unless one chooses to read Scripture in a way that simply sustains his existing prejudice.” It’s pretty clear isn’t it, that Harvard retains no vestige of what it once was? It has become certainly a wonderful institution of higher learning in terms of number of academic courses, study, but it has become something all together different.

What I want you to see is that is exactly the kind of radical change that had happened to Judaism. By the time of the first century, Judaism had very little left in common with what God Himself had instituted at Sinai. It was a different animal. On the issue of authority, it had replaced God’s authority, the Scripture alone, with human tradition. And on the issue of salvation, it had replaced sola fide and sola gratia, that is through faith alone by grace alone, with works righteousness. And so because it had become something so different, Christ confronts what it had become. And He does so in Mark chapter 7, and I invite you to turn there with me again tonight. Mark, chapter 7.

As Mark unfolds the account here, and we’ve been in it for a couple of weeks, you see first, the external nature of legalism. With all of the rules that it had made, including the washing of hands, the washing of pots, and other vessels, the fact that you needed a bath when you came back from the market just in case you had been somehow touched by something unclean and rendered unclean, they had added and added to the law of God. And then you have Jesus’ personal diagnosis of legalism in verses 6-13, and Jesus essentially says this: You have deliberately, willfully, substituted your man-made rules for God’s eternal Word. And then He gives them an example of how their oral tradition had actually annulled God’s commands. The illustration, you remember, had to do with parents and caring for aging parents. The Pharisees, by their tradition, had circumvented God’s command to honor their parents.

What Jesus says in verses 6-13, and I introduced this to you a couple weeks ago, is more than a simple chastisement. Jesus isn’t “slapping their hands” so to speak. He isn’t “rapping their knuckles.” Jesus is, instead, rendering a verdict about what first century Judaism had become. And essentially, first century Judaism had compromised on a couple of things. It had become completely worthless, it had become corrupt, it had even ceased to be the true faith in the true God all together. It had become instead a false religion. Why? Well the two reasons you see here; Jesus identifies both of them in this text. One is, it had substituted its source of authority; instead of the Word of God, it had bought into oral tradition and the teachings of men. And, it had substituted works righteousness; that is, what I do, and who I am, earns my right standing before God, rather than, the righteousness of God given to me as a gift, received by faith.

Those were the two compromises they had made. First of all, the source of authority; by the time of the first century, the Jews had been orally passing down this teaching and interpretation of the rabbis for at least a couple of hundred years, and we talked about that. The Talmud, made up of the Mishnah and the Gemara, who interpreted the interpretations. They believed that oral tradition was as important as the Torah itself.

But the other reason and the one I want to dwell on tonight, why first century Judaism had become worthless, is because of how it abused the truth of how a man is made right with God, the way of salvation. Judaism had replaced salvation by grace alone through faith alone, with salvation by grace plus personal righteousness.

There's certainly no doubt that's true today. I mentioned in our last study together the work of Herman Wouk, who wrote a book called, "This is My God." A best seller attempting to communicate what modern day Judaism believes. In that book this is what he says: "In Judaism..." this is today now, "In Judaism, right conduct is the path to God. This path lies open to Jews and non-Jews. Judaism has never tried to save souls by converting them. It teaches that salvation lies in people's conduct before God, not in their taking on the special commands that bind the house of Abraham. So what am I as a non-Jewish person to do? Well, I need to keep the law of the sons of Noah, which demands seven concepts: the worship of God, no murder, no theft, no incest or sexual aberrations, no eating the limb of the living (that is cruelty to animals), the ban on blasphemy, and justice, the establishment of courts, justice, and the system of equality and equity." Basically if you do that, Wouk says, "Nations and persons that live by these precepts are in the Talmud's phrase, 'The righteous of the world.'" Do these things and you will be counted righteous before God.

Now most of us have always heard and been taught, that that same works-based righteousness was what characterized Judaism in the time of Christ. But there are significant voices in evangelicalism today, that have an agenda to deny that. Now, I'm going to take a moment to develop this, because if you haven't heard of this you will. I had probably a half a dozen people in our church ask me about what I'm about to explain, so this is beginning to filter down from the ivory towers, which is where it started back in the 70s, and now it has found its way into mainstream popular Christianity.

The argument goes something like this: Since the Reformation, we have misunderstood what Paul and Jesus were attacking in the first century and in first century Judaism. They say, "You know the scribes and Pharisees, they didn't teach a works-based salvation, you've misread them; that isn't it at all. Instead, they believed in grace just like we do. And our misunderstanding of the problem has caused us to misunderstand the whole New Testament concept of justification. We've gotten it all wrong." This new teaching is often referred to as the New Perspective, or the New Perspective on Paul.

Now again, just to give you a brief overview of the history, I'm not going to belabor this, but I want you to know where this came from. It started with a man named E. P. Sanders. E. P. Sanders was born and grew up in Grand Prairie. He attended Wesleyan College in Fort Worth, as well as Perkins School of Theology at SMU. And then he studied in a few other places, eventually got his Th.D. at Union Theological up in New York, and for many years he was the Professor of Religion at Duke University in North Carolina from 1990 until he retired in 2005. Sanders wrote several works that laid the foundation for this New Perspective on Paul. So he's kind of the grandfather.

But the one who has brought it down from the ivory towers, most of E. P. Sanders' original stuff was written, you know, as much as 30 years ago, the one who's brought it down from the ivory tower who has a more popular voice, the biblical scholar who's made this view popular is a man named N. T. Wright, or you'll sometimes see his more layman-type books, he's called Tom Wright. But N. T. Wright. N. T. Wright is the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England, and he is a leading New Testament scholar, he is certainly a scholar, there's no question about that; but N. T. Wright likes all things new. He likes to look at the Bible and come up with fresh approaches to the Bible, by his own admission.

He's written several books defending his view; it's a very difficult view to understand, because he uses terms we use with different meanings. The best summary, if you want to read a little more on this, and I know many of you won't, but some of you might, would be to pick up John Piper's new book called, "The Future of Justification." In Piper's new book, he, first of all accurately represents Wright's views, in fact he sent a manuscript to Wright and Wright sent him back I forget, a large volume of material saying, "No, this is it, this is it," correcting what Piper had written, and Piper incorporated those into the final manuscript. So there's no question what he's accurately representing, N. T. Wright.

And then, Piper summarizes what Wright teaches about justification. Here's the summary of what Wright teaches, and I'll give it to you in short bullet points, and they're frankly shocking. In the book, Piper substantiates each of these with a number of quotes from N. T. Wright. So this isn't made up, this isn't fabricated, he's not creating a straw man. This is what Wright believes.

First of all, he would say, that the gospel is not about how to get saved. We've gotten that all wrong. It's not about personal salvation. Secondly, he would say justification is not about how you become a Christian. Thirdly, justification is not the gospel. Fourth, he would say, we are not justified by believing in justification. Fifthly, he says God's righteousness is the same as His covenant faithfulness; in other words, when we're told that God is righteous and He communicates that righteousness, it just means He's faithful, that's all it means; has nothing to do with a courtroom, God declaring the believing sinner to be just – all of that's wrong, because we've misunderstood the definition. Sixth, he says the imputation of God's own righteousness to the sinner, that's what we describe as justification, my sins imputed to Christ on the cross, God

treats Christ as if He'd lived my life, Christ's righteousness imputed to me, he says that makes no sense at all. Seven, he says future justification, when I am in the future justified before God, it will be on the basis of the complete life lived; that is, I will be justified, I will be declared righteous before God, based on the life I lived, that is by my own effort, by my own work.

And then here's the foundation of all of this; this is where E. P. Sanders started. The eighth part of his view is this: first century Judaism had nothing of the alleged self-righteousness and legalism that we have made it mean. That's really the foundation of all of this; we've misread the New Testament, we have taken a wonderful, grace-loving group of people, the Pharisees and the scribes, and we've made them the devil himself, and that's our mistake.

So that is what the whole thing is based upon. Wright says that in Galatians, Paul was not confronting legalistic works-righteousness. So what was he confronting? Listen to Wright, in his own words: He says, "Judaism in Paul's day was not as has regularly been supposed a religion of legalistic works-righteousness. If we imagine that it was and that Paul was attacking it as if it was, we will do great violence to it and to him. The Jew, in the New Testament, keeps the law out of gratitude, as the proper response to grace, not in other words in order to get into the covenant people, but to stay in. Being in, in the first place, was God's gift."

So what are the works that Paul damns in Galatians? Well that raises an important question. Here's how Piper summarizes Wright's view: "Paul's problem was not that these Jewish people..." (remember the Judaizers in Galatians?) "...were trying to earn God's favor by their own self-wrought righteousness; but rather that they failed to see their calling to reach the nations, and instead used their badge..." (that is the badge of their relationship to God) "...to exclude Gentiles from the covenant. What does that mean? It means that the Judaizers' problem wasn't that they were trying to earn their way to heaven, it was that they were too ethnocentric." I'm not making that up. They were too ethnocentric; they were too into their Jewishness.

Now, why do I take the time to share this with you? Because this radical reinterpretation of the New Testament is permeating American Christianity. That includes the Bible faculty at some leading evangelical Christian colleges and universities, whose names you would recognize; even locally, the faculty of a local Christian high school has been enamored with N. T. Wright.

So the key question I want us to answer, because it's really raised in the text of Mark 7 is this: does the New Testament support the foundation of Wright's view? Was first century Judaism completely grace based, and their only problem, the only problem Jesus and Paul had with them was they were too ethnocentric; they were too Jewish, excluding the Gentiles? Was that really the issue? I want us to look at the evidence, and I want us to look at the evidence, not only to answer N. T. Wright, but I want you to hear Jesus; because Jesus is passing judgment on false religion in this passage, and on the other passages we'll look at tonight; and I want you to see His thought about it.

First of all we'll start with Paul. Does Paul believe that the Pharisees of the first century were these wonderful grace-loving people, who just were too into their Jewishness? Well, remember Paul was a Pharisee, don't forget that, Philippians 3, he says he was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, he was one of the more fastidious ones; how did he describe his own religion before he met Christ on the Damascus Road? Turn over to Romans chapter 7. Here's Paul, writing to the Romans, describing his life before the Damascus Road. Romans 7 verse 7; you tell me, does this sound like someone who understood grace, had embraced it, and was loving God? Verse 7, "What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COVET.'" You see, Paul thought he was fine; he thought he kept all the external Law well, but when he got to number 10, there was a problem. He could say, "I've never murdered anybody, I've never done this, I've never done that, I've never stolen anything." But when he got to number 10, he realized that God's Law wasn't just about the outside, it was about the inside. "You shall not covet." And then he realized that meant all of the other commands were internal, as Jesus interpreted them in the Sermon on the Mount.

And so, as a result of that, verse 8, "...sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind..." because the Law only awakens the flesh. How many times have you said to your children, "Don't do that," and then they want to know what it is they're not supposed to touch, so they can touch it? That's how the Law works, and that's what it did to Paul. "...when the commandment came, sin became alive..." verse 9, "...and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me." Now you tell me, does that sound like someone who was spiritually alive, who was living by grace? This is Paul's description of himself before he came to Christ.

Now you have to interpret chapter 10 of Romans in light of that. Chapter 10 verse 1, he says, I want to see my Jewish brothers come to faith in Christ. They have a zeal for God, but it's not in accordance with the true knowledge of God. "...not knowing about God's righteousness they are seeking to establish their own,..." just like I was, is implied. And because of that, "...they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God." Again, what's his verdict, of his state as a Pharisee before he met Christ on the Damascus Road?

Ephesians 2, we looked at when we went through there; remember how he includes himself? "You were dead..." he says initially, and then he says, "Among them we too all formerly lived..." We, myself included; before Christ I lived in the lusts of my flesh, I indulged the desires of the flesh and of the mind, I was by nature a child of wrath, even as the rest; "...even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)."

That's Paul's verdict on his pre-Damascus Road life as a Pharisee. First Timothy 1:13, "...I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because

I acted ignorantly in unbelief.” Titus chapter 3 verse 3, “...we,” again he includes himself with the people he’s writing to, to Titus’ young son in the faith and the others there in Crete who would read this letter; “...we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another.”

Now folks, Paul clearly did not see his life as a Pharisee steeped in first century Judaism as a life permeated by the knowledge of God’s grace. In fact, notice how Paul describes those who held the very views he used to hold. Philippians 3:2; remember now, he’s talking about Judaizers, he calls them dogs, evil workers, false circumcision. In verse 5, he calls himself a Pharisee who was trying to, by his own righteousness achieve favor with God, and then he says later in that same chapter and I love this, everything I used to think was my asset became my liability, I counted all of that stuff, “...rubbish so that I may gain Christ and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.” Obviously he’s making a comment, he’s juxtaposing his life as a Pharisee with what has happened as a result of an encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road.

But if Paul is clear about works righteousness, Jesus is even more clear and direct, that Judaism had come to embrace it. I want you to look at the teaching of Jesus, and this is really where I want us to spend our time. Jesus could not be clearer about the nature of first century Judaism and what it had become. Turn back to Mark chapter 7. This is where we’ll start because He makes some very clear comments here. Look at verse 6:

And He said to them, ‘Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.’

Look at those lines, “...their heart is far...from Me.” Their worship of God, He’s talking to the Pharisees here, remember, their worship of God was not from a pure, sincere heart, but it was merely external; it was not saving, rescuing faith. And then He says in verse 7, “...in vain do they worship Me.” Their worship is empty, it accomplishes nothing. It’s hard to imagine a greater rebuke from Christ to these religious people; He essentially said this about them: their faith is a façade, it’s a show, it’s external, it’s hypocrisy; they don’t know Me, and I don’t accept their worship. That’s what Jesus said. They’re frauds.

But this wasn’t the only place Jesus made these kinds of comments. You go to Matthew chapter 5 verse 20, you remember in the Sermon on the Mount? He makes this shocking statement: “...I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Now think about that. He was saying to them, they’re not getting in. And you won’t either, unless your righteousness is beyond theirs. It was an assessment about

the fact that they weren't part of the kingdom, and couldn't be, because their righteousness couldn't muster the level it needed to get them in.

Matthew chapter 12, verse 38, "... some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, 'Teacher we want to see a sign from You.'" They were always after this. You know, I understand something of the frustration of when you teach and people don't get it; but I'm nothing like the Lord. I can't imagine being God incarnate, teaching always clear, always effectively, and they're not getting it. And You do miracle, after miracle, after miracle, and they say, "You know if You just show us a sign we'd believe." Notice what Jesus says to these scribes and Pharisees: "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign..." You know what Jesus was saying to them? You are part and parcel of an evil and spiritually adulterous generation, and I'm not giving you any other signs, except to remind you what happened to Jonah; three days, three nights, and then out. That's a huge rebuke.

But by far the most poignant statements of our Lord come in Matthew 23; I want you to turn over there. This is during the Passion Week of our Lord; Jesus is nearing His death. Verse 1 of chapter 23, "... Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying..." So He's on the Temple Mount area, it's where the scribes and Pharisees would have hung around, especially at feast time, they would have all been there, all within hearing, He gathers His own disciples around Him and He gathers as well, a crowd around Him, and He begins to teach them. Right now He begins by speaking to His disciples and the crowd about the scribes and Pharisees; notice that in verse 2. He said, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves..." And He basically tells His disciples in the first 12 verses, "Don't do what they do." And remember they're standing just off the fringes listening to this.

But then, beginning in verse 13, He turns His attention away from His disciples, sort of looks over the crowd, at the scribes and Pharisees who watching this whole thing unfold there in the last days before His death, and He pronounces a series, depending upon how many you count here, there's different commentators take different views, seven or eight "woes" on the Pharisees. He's basically saying to them, "You are worthy of God's condemnation and His damnation." "Woe to you..." verse 13, "...scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites..." now watch this, "...because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in." Not only do you not come into the kingdom I'm offering, not only are you not a part of My spiritual kingdom, but you keep other people who want to come, you tell them to ignore Me, you tell them I'm a false prophet. Wow!

Look at verse 15: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte..." one Gentile convert to Judaism, "...and when he becomes one..." watch this, "...you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves." You think Jesus is clear? You are children of hell, you are bound for hell, and when you get a convert, when you get a proselyte, you make him twice the child of hell you are.

Verse 23, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin...” You tithe garden herbs, which wasn’t necessarily commanded, what was commanded was to tithe to basically pay to the Temple treasury for the support of the government, you paid a tithe, or ten percent of the produce, if you were in agriculture, if you had a field, if you grew crops, then you were to tithe that. They even tithed their garden herbs; you just see some Pharisee sitting over counting his dill seeds. But you’ve, “neglected the weightier provisions of the law.” You missed the big point. “...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...” You’re so concerned about getting an unclean animal that you strain your water so a gnat doesn’t get into it, so you don’t become unclean, in the process you swallow a camel. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside 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.”

This past week I decided I needed to get to work early one morning as often happens and so I didn’t have a chance to grab some coffee at home so I decided okay I’ll grab some coffee on the way out; I pulled my little Starbucks mug off of the shelf you know, the one that’s thermalized so it keeps the coffee warm and thought I’d stop by and get some coffee. Well, I don’t know exactly how this happened and I’m not blaming anyone in my family for this, but apparently when it came out of the dishwasher it was sitting upright and the water and all of the stuff that’s thrown around in your dishwasher got thrown inside the cup, and the lid got put back on it, and it was sitting in the cabinet. And so I show up at Starbucks with my little cup and I unscrew the lid and hand it to the guy and we’re having a little conversation and he grabs the cup and he walks over to the coffee machine and he looks down in my cup. And you know it’s got this dirty water with all these little floaties in it. And he said, “Do you want me to empty this?” The outside was clean, but I didn’t want to drink any coffee from that cup.

That’s what Jesus is saying to these people. You go to extremes to clean everything on the outside so you look good, but inside notice what you’re full of, “robbery.” You are taking advantage of people, you are getting rich on the backs of poor people who are trying to buy favor with God, you are taking money from them, and “self-indulgence.” It’s all about the money and what you can buy with it. You are in, and other places that I showed you, they are lovers of money. Clean the inside of the cup.

Verse 27, “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs...” What they would do is, there were tombs; if you’ve ever been to Israel there are tombs all over the hillsides, and that does render you unclean from a Jewish standpoint and the cleanliness laws of the Old Testament in terms of that ability to worship God, to be at the Temple, to have access to God; there were those laws, you couldn’t touch a dead body. So, they would whitewash the tombs so that you knew where they were, so you didn’t accidentally stumble across one and render yourself unclean and not be able to go to Temple that day. Jesus says, “you’re just like that. You’ve got a coat of white paint, you look good, but inside you’re

full of death, rottenness, decay.” Inside, verse 28, “...you... outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Look at the end of verse 33. “You serpents,” [you are a bunch of snakes] “...you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?” Now you tell me, what was Jesus’ verdict on the spiritual condition of the scribes and Pharisees? Were they in? Obviously not.

Eighteen times Jesus calls someone a “hypocrite” in the New Testament; 16 of those times it is the scribes and Pharisees. With that in mind, look at Matthew 24. Matthew 24, verse 51; He gives a parable and He ends the parable with these words, verse 50: “The master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and an hour which he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites...” So where exactly do hypocrites; remember Jesus has just called them that 16 times, where exactly do hypocrites, in Jesus’ terms, show up? “...in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

You’re not the real thing, you don’t belong. You want everybody to believe you’re in, but you’re out. In Luke chapter 16:14, we read this: “...the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things [Jesus’ teaching] and were scoffing at Him.” They’re standing on the sideline making fun of Jesus. “And He said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts.’” In other words, you’re not justified in God’s sight, “...for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.” Then Jesus goes on in Luke 16 to tell a parable; you remember the parable of the rich man and Lazarus? Both of them die, one ends up in heaven, Lazarus, with a banquet with Abraham, and the rich man dies, and opens up his eyes in hell. Do you understand what Jesus was saying? That parable follows this comment. Jesus was depicting a money-loving religious Pharisee as unredeemed, and he would wake up upon the moment of death and find himself in eternal torment.

The last passage I want you to see is, turn over to Luke 18. Luke 18, verse 9; Jesus tells this parable, “...some people...” watch this, “...who trusted in themselves that they were righteous...” This is the scribes and the Pharisees, and their confidence was in themselves and their own righteousness, Jesus says through the writings of Luke. And they viewed others with contempt. Look how the story unfolds, verse 10: “Two men went up the temple to pray...” Twice a day, if you lived in Jerusalem you went up to the temple to pray, morning sacrifice, evening sacrifice. Wasn’t just a place for sacrifice, it was a place for prayer, and as we saw this morning, praise. And so they’re praying. “...Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this...” I love this, “...to himself.” I think it’s a turn of phrase. I think obviously he means, you know, in his heart; he wasn’t speaking out loud, necessarily, but I think it also means it wasn’t rising any higher than the way his voice could be heard physically; God wasn’t listening. “Thank you [God] that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.” Notice the basis on which this man thinks he has a right standing before God; it’s what he

doesn't do and what he does. It's about him; it's about his own righteousness, and this is the Pharisee. Jesus says, this is how they think.

"But..." verse 13, "...the tax collector," the lowest, despicable place in the Jewish social ladder; he was a collaborator with Rome, he was considered worse than a terrorist would be, in fact, the Zealots were looked up on compared to the tax collectors. "...standing some distance away, was [unwilling even] to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'" In fact, I love that expression. You know what he actually says? In the Greek text he says, "God..." Now remember the sacrifice is going on at this moment, that animal's being killed to satisfy the wrath of God, and he says, "God, may Your wrath be satisfied toward me, a sinner!" Be propitiated, may Your wrath be satisfied for me, a sinner.

Now notice Jesus' verdict, verse 14: "I tell you, this man..." (that is the tax gatherer) "...went to his house justified..." declared right before God; obviously he wasn't righteous, we've just heard everything that he was; he acknowledged his own sin, but in a moment's time, even though he was a sinner, he is declared right before God, on the basis of his repentance and faith, rather than the other, i.e., the Pharisee was not declared right before God, because all of his confidence was in himself. Remember what Jesus said back in verses 14 and 15? "You justify yourselves." And they, "trusted in themselves that they were righteous." Evidence is pretty clear isn't it?

Now, very quickly, what are the lessons for us? From the passage, as well as from Jesus' confrontation. First of all, I want you to see the lessons, what it tells us about false religion. Of all sins, the sins that brought the worst condemnation from Christ were false religion. Not those enslaved by false religion, but those who taught it and enslaved others. And first century Judaism had become a false religion; in fact, first century Judaism provides us with two markers of all false religion. Mark this: you want to know if there's a false religion? There's a rejection of sola scriptura as the source of authority. Jesus categorically rejects any interpretation of the Scripture having equal weight with the Scripture in this text we've studied. Your interpretation, my interpretation, doesn't carry the same weight as the Scripture itself, because our interpretation is open to human corruption. Folks, that means we're talking about the writings of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, we're talking about the Roman Catholic Magisterium, we're talking about any interpretation that carries more weight than the Scripture itself. When that happens, it is a marker of false religion.

The other marker is a rejection of sola gratia, that is by grace alone, as the source of a right standing before God. Jesus makes it clear that no self-made righteousness is ever enough to earn heaven. You want to identify false religion? Obviously, there are other markers, the deity of Christ and other things, but invariably, one or both of these will be violated as well.

What's the source of their authority? That's the first question you ask. The second question is, on what basis is a man made right with God? And you find out the answer to those two questions and very quickly you will know whether it is true or false.

Secondly, I want you to see what this tells us about ourselves. Very personally, there is no way, and you know this but I want you to hear this as if you've never heard it before, there is no way, you or I will ever earn heaven by our own goodness, by our own acts, by our own merit, by who we are. When we stand before God in the day of judgment, if any bit of our answer of "why should I let you into heaven?" is because of something I am, or something I've done, then there's no hope. Because Jesus Himself said, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." They were externally righteous, but there was a problem – it's the same problem we have; we're going to see it in the next paragraph in this text, in Mark 7, and it's that all of my problems don't come from the outside. Your problems don't come from the outside. Our problems come from within; they're who we are. Out of the heart, Jesus says, all of these sins come. They couldn't deal with that, and neither can we; and so there's no way we will ever earn heaven based on who we are or what we do.

It also reminds us of our need of grace and grace alone. Since we can't earn God's favor, we can't earn a right standing, all we have is grace; and God's grace is enough.

Thirdly, it is only those who understand their need of grace, who can be justified before God. That's what we saw there in Luke 18, in the parable of the Pharisee and the sinner. The sinner understood, the tax collector understood that he had no hope of pleading anything before God except His mercy. He threw himself on God's mercy. He didn't say, "Look at who I am, look at what I've done, look at my baptism, look at my profession, look at the family I'm a part of, look at what I'm trying to do, I'm doing the best I can." He said, "God I only have one hope, and that's if You, as an act of grace, will be satisfied, Your wrath will be satisfied toward me. God, may Your wrath be satisfied toward me, the sinner."

Fourthly, we learn this about ourselves: if we will repent and believe as that tax collector did, God will in a moment of time declare us, even though we are sinners – he was a sinner; it's not like that declaration had anything to do with a change in his actual righteousness, it was, instead, a moment's declaration. At one moment he was a sinner, acknowledging that before God; the next moment he was justified Jesus said. He went down to his house declared "right before God." Why? Because that's how he came, in repentance and faith.

You know I don't ever want to take for granted that everybody sitting here tonight is in Christ, because I know that isn't true. There are undoubtedly people sitting under the sound of my voice tonight who know they're not Christians. There're also others, who've deceived themselves that they are, based on something they've done; "I do the best I can." It's not enough, and it never will be. Your only hope is to do what that tax collector did, then you can go down to your house tonight justified.

I want to finish by citing what this passage tells us about Christ. Very briefly, Christ knows our hearts, just as He knew the Pharisees' hearts. What does He do here? He says, I know what you are – your heart isn't right with God. This happens over and over again with Jesus. John 2:25,

“He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.”
Matthew 9:4, “...Jesus knowing their thoughts said, ‘Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?’”
John 6, “...‘there are some of you who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him.”

Listen, Jesus knows the heart of every person here tonight. He knows your heart. He knows whether you’re one of His true disciples, or whether you’re like the scribes and Pharisees, trusting in something you are or something you’ve done. He knows. There’s no way to hide, there’s no way to hide the reality from Christ.

There’s another lesson about Christ in this passage; He’s the only way to God. He says this again and again, John 3:36, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” John 8:24, “Therefore I said that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.” John 14:6, “I am the way, and the way, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.” And later the apostles preach that same message; Peter in Acts 4:10 says, “Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ...whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead – it’s by His name this man stands here before you in good health...And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be rescued”; we must be saved.

Jesus – the only way. We know that, but do we really embrace that reality?

One other thing it tells us about Christ; He has the power to save, even those who are captured in false religion, with its works-based righteousness. I love this; I love this, because it’s true of me. Before I came to faith in Christ, I put my confidence in a lot of things, I was self-righteous like the Pharisees, so I love this reality. You see it in Jesus’ life and ministry, you see it in Nicodemus. John 3:1 says that he was a Pharisee. He comes to Jesus, Jesus tells him you must be born again, and he doesn’t get it. But the Spirit blows where He wills, and He swept across the heart of Nicodemus, so that by the time you get to the end of John’s gospel in 19:39, he’s going with Joseph of Arimathea to get the body of Christ, because he’s become one of His disciples. Snatched, out of that terrible system, that enslaving system of works-based righteousness, and the same was true for Paul. Thank God, the same is true for some of us here tonight. Jesus has the power to save even those captured in a world and web of self-righteousness, thinking that we can somehow earn our way into God’s favor. But by God’s goodness and grace we come to the same place as the tax collector. The Pharisee becomes, and takes the role of the tax collector, and says, God, be merciful to me, the sinner, and then he goes down to his house justified. Let’s pray together.

Father, I pray that You would help us to hate, as our Lord hated, enslaving false religion, and those who teach it and enslave people in its systems. But Father, help us even more, to glory in our Redeemer, the One who can shatter gates of bronze, bars of iron, bring people out of systems

in which they are enslaved, and make them His own disciples. Thank You for the example of Nicodemus, the example of Paul, and for countless of us, here tonight, who lived before we really came to know Christ, in the lies of works-based righteousness. Father, I pray that You would give us a love for grace, and give us a deeper love for Christ who can free the enslaved. Thank You for Your work in our lives, may we worship You as our Lord and our Redeemer and our coming King, we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.