

RULES AND REGULATIONS
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You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition. Mark 7:8

Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, as they criticized him for not observing the ostentatious, ceremonial traditions of the Jewish faith: how and when to wash your hands; the elaborate washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles; and too many others rules to even mention. At this point, these rules had nothing to do with hygiene. They were simply traditions that had been created as a way of telling people how they should live, and these traditions had become their religion.

A person could be murderously angry, jealous, resentful, filled with pride – but as long as they observed the traditions and looked good from the outside, they were respected.

Today, we may not require ritual hand washing or a hundred dietary restrictions, but we have our own set of rules and traditions: church dress codes, certain styles of worship music, racial or gender discrimination, certain liturgies or the lack thereof. We have a hundred rules, some written, some just expected. These things aren't necessarily sinful. But when the rules become our religion – and, if we're not careful, that can happen – then Christians truly earn the description, "hypocrite".

Simply put, hypocrisy is a life of acting out what seems to be correct, without any real sincerity of feeling behind it. It's talking the talk, but not walking the walk. And you know, people are watching! Once folks know we're Christians, they're looking for signs of hypocrisy; they want to see if we're action, or just words.

Going to worship, doing a devotional in the morning, even giving and serving don't automatically make us good Christians. All these acts of service must spring from hearts that love God and love one another. For the Jewish religious leaders, the rules were their religion; for Jesus, religion is all about inner heart attitudes. It's about humility, honesty, forgiveness, and love. Following rules and looking good on the outside will not change our hearts on the inside.

Anyone to whom religion is a legal thing ... anyone to whom religion means carrying out certain external rules and regulations ... anyone to whom religion is all about observing certain rituals and keeping all the old traditions ... is, in the end, bound to be a hypocrite, because that person believes he's a good Christian if he holds to certain external practices ... no matter what his heart is like. And Jesus has some very strong things to say about that.

Now, as then, Jesus asks us to examine ourselves honestly. Where are our hearts? Do we love God, and stay close in touch with him? Are we kind to those around us, showing them the same grace and love we receive from Jesus? If people are watching us, let's make sure that's what they see!