

THE COMPASS

MYTH PERCEPTIONS: Straight From Jesus' Mouth

MYTH #1: *I must observe certain religious traditions in order to please God*

The Official List of Sins

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What is sin?

Is it a sin for a guy to look at a pretty girl and imagine what she would be like sexually?

What if, let's say, he's single, and he's actually looking around for a possible bride?

Is it a sin for him to look at a pretty girl and imagine the sexual component of being married to her?

If he asks her to marry him, does it stop being a sin?

Or if she needs some time to think about it before she gives her answer, is it a sin after he asks her but before she says yes?

Good grief!

Is there a place in the Bible that tells me where the sin starts, where the sin stops?

And is there a sharp line between the two?

Or is it kind of fuzzy, and you ooze from sinfulness to righteousness?

And if you ooze, how much sinfulness can you get away with, and how much righteousness do you really need, in order to be right with God?

We tend to observe private definitions of sin.

If you and I sit down one-on-one and talk about what constitutes sin, we would probably have different definitions of sin.

100 talking about it would have 100 different ideas of what sin really is.

Not only do we observe our own private definitions of sin, but also: **We tend to judge each other against our own definition of sin.**

We have differing views of each other based on what the other person thinks of as sin compared to what WE think of as sin.

And: **We tend to observe degrees of sin.**

The guy who robs a bank is sinning.

The guy who drives the getaway car is — what? Not quite as sinful?

The guy who socks the bank teller in the kisser is — hm, worse than the guy who grabs the dough, or equally sinful?

I don't know.

Depends on your definition of sin.

And what if the bad guys take hostages, and force the hostages to grab the money, or shoot bank employees who talk back.

Is it a sin if somebody forced you to do it?

And then you have to answer the question: What constitutes "forcing"?

The bad guy threatens you? — OK, if he threatens to kill you, that's "forcing," but if he threatens to kick you in the shins, that's not "forcing"?

Sin is so confusing!

Where does my responsibility start, and where does it end?

Even the 3 "good guys" whose whole life stories are told in the Bible — Samuel, Daniel, and Joseph — had a weird "sin thing" in common: All 3 served corrupt masters. Samuel served Eli. Daniel served Nebuchadnezzar. Joseph served Potiphar, and then Pharaoh.

All 3 of these guys were required to contribute to a sinful system.

In fact, all 3 of these men were commended by God for excelling in their service to sinfulness.

So what's a sin? And what's not?

Isn't there a firm list somewhere, and you can just avoid doing anything on the list?

People have been concerned with this question from the very beginning of human history.

Adam and Eve got caught in the web, when they started trying to factor in the contingencies that the serpent was offering up:

Is it really a sin if it actually makes you more like God in the end?

Isn't that the point — to be more like God?

In Jesus' day, the sin debate was huge — especially because back then, the line between church and state was really fuzzy then compared to the way it is in our day and age, and the religious leaders back then had loads of power.

Among the religious leaders, the strictest guys were the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were absolutely fixated on obedience of the law.

They believed it was obedience of the law that made them right with God.

They did not see God as a loving Father who wanted the best for us for our own sake; they saw God as a strict taskmaster who wanted the best for us for HIS sake.

So the Pharisees, as you can imagine, did not want to even come CLOSE to sinning.

And they did not want YOU to come close to sinning, either.

So they not only observed the Ten Commandments, and all the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, but they built hundreds of additional rules and regulations around the law as a kind of barricade to make absolutely sure that they didn't even get CLOSE to breaking any of the laws.

Not all these extra regulations were written down.

There was an oral tradition in Israel, where the rabbis would hand down their teachings from generation to generation.

This body of orally communicated rules was finally written down 200 years after Christ; it was called the Mishnah.

The Mishnah became part of the authority system, right alongside the Old Testament Scriptures.

It came to have as much weight, as much force, as the Scriptures themselves.

For example: The Pharisees would not eat without ritually washing their hands first.

The Law of Moses required the priests to wash carefully before they handled the animal sacrifices in the Temple, but eventually the Pharisees said, If you want to be truly spiritual, you have to observe the same kind of ritual whether you're a priest or not, and you have to do it in your everyday life.

You would do one ritual cleansing in the morning when you woke up.

Then you would do another ritual cleansing before a meal.

There were rules about how much water you were supposed to use.

There was a minimum — you couldn't do what your second-grader does, use about 3 drops of water and say, "There! Clean!"

The minimum amount of water you could use for washing up before a meal was enough water to fill 1-1/2 eggshells.

You had to position your hands and arms a certain way when you washed them.

A rabbi named Josep determined that failure to wash the hands ritually was "as great a sin as adultery."

Now there's nothing wrong with establishing traditions or even regulations that a group of people *agree* to as a means of improving the efficiency of their work or ministry.

I attended a church years ago where any man who was on the stage on Sunday morning agreed to wear a black suit.

There was nothing wrong with that; if you didn't *agree* with the traditions they had established, you didn't have to go to church there.

Sometimes traditions are established as a response to a problem that needs to be solved or to bridge the gap for some human failing — like regulating the length of the skirts on the women who appear on the stage of your church.

Or regulating what kinds of entertainment are appropriate for the leaders of your church. It's not about Scripture.

It's a tradition that this group of people have settled on as a way of conducting themselves according to their unique values and concerns.

What substances can you use? How do you wear your hair? How do you express yourself in worship? How do you pray? What kind of music do you do? How do you refer to each other? Do you call me Brother Brendel? Or Mr. Brendel? Pastor Brendel? Pastor Doug?

Jesus wasn't against tradition *per se*.

In fact, he wasn't "for" some traditions and "against" others, and you have to figure out which are on the "in" list and which are on the "out" list.

Jesus never said, Hey, your traditions are wrong in and of themselves.

Here's what he DID say — one day, when some of these Pharisees came from Jerusalem to challenge him on this (**Matthew 15**).

These guys came a long, long way — I think it was about 80 miles, which in those days was a tremendous distance — so this was not a casual encounter; they were clearly loaded for bear.

And they asked him,

2 "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

But Jesus turned the tables on them — he answered their question with another question:

3 Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?”

And then he gave them this killer example — which is kind of hard for us to understand in our culture today, but I’ll try to explain it to you.

Here’s what Jesus went on to say:

4 For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ [he’s referring to the 5th commandment of the Ten Commandments here] **and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’** [This is Exodus 21:17, another part of the Law of Moses for the nation of Israel]

5 But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’

6 he is not to ‘honor his father ’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

What is Jesus talking about here?

He’s talking about the custom of “Korban.”

Korban was not part of the Law that God gave Moses; it was part of the Mishnah, the teaching that the rabbis were developing on their own.

Korban was where you could ritually consecrate any of your assets to God — you could declare your home to be Korban, consecrated to God, or you could declare all your income to be Korban, officially dedicated to God — literally a “gift to God.”

Now you can see how this might have started out as a good thing.

Some churches, for example, set aside a piece of property on their grounds as a prayer garden.

They say, We’re going to agree not to use this area for anything but prayer.

It’s consecrated for a special purpose.

It makes a statement.

It’s intended to glorify God in a certain special way.

The problem was, along the way, the tradition of Korban got out of hand, because under this religious system, if something was consecrated to God, it couldn’t be given away to anyone less than God; such a thing would be regarded as irreverent or disrespectful to God.

So Korban effectively locked something up; it couldn’t be used.

Then somebody got the bright idea that you could effectively HIDE your stuff by declaring it Korban, like a tax shelter.

If there was somebody you didn’t want to have to give help to, you could just declare your assets to be Korban, and when they would come to you for help — Sorry!

And here’s one way it could become a big problem: How would you take care of your relatives, if they had a need?

The 5th commandment says “Honor your father and mother,” and in that culture, there was no Social Security, no Medicare, no Medicaid, no nursing homes.

When your mom and dad retired, or if they got sick, you’re IT.

You’re required to take care of them.

But you know, the Pharisees were horrified by anyone who was ill, because sick people were ceremonially unclean, and in fact, the Pharisees tended to be well off financially, and they liked it that way — so the idea of being required to share the wealth, to spend their money, on their senior citizen parents was annoying.

And the way they got out of it was to declare all their money to be an official gift to God: Korban.

Mom? Dad? You're old and sick? Sorry! I don't have a dollar on me. I got all my money tied up in the temple. Rats. Good luck!

It's rationalizing. It's getting out on a technicality.

And Jesus looked at this kind of stuff and said,

7 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

[And then he quotes Isaiah 29:13:]

8 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

9 They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'"

Jesus pushed continuously for people to get the SPIRIT of his teachings.

Not to memorize the letter of the law, but to capture the spirit of the truth.

And to let HIS Spirit actually live in us.

People who turned a relationship with God into a list of rules and regulations and then squinted at the fine print in order to get out of doing the stuff they didn't want to do, on some kind of technicality, made Jesus furious.

But then Jesus' disciples — always concerned about public relations — got nervous.

They came to Jesus and said,

12 ...“Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?”

But Jesus wasn't having any of this.

13 He replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.

14 Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”

You can see what a threat Jesus was to the religious establishment.

He didn't carefully observe all the traditions of the Pharisees — he wasn't a part of their operation, and he hadn't agreed to observe their traditions.

Jesus was Jewish, and he submitted himself to the Law of Moses. But he never submitted himself to the Mishnah, the law of men.

In fact, Jesus mingled and socialized with the worst kinds of sinners — he partied with the dregs of society — which was horrifying to the Pharisees.

Jesus understood that all these restrictions on behavior were not what life is supposed to be about.

They were not what God is looking for.

In **Psalm 51:16,17**, the songwriter David says to God,

16 You do not delight in sacrifice ... you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart....

The longing of God's heart is that our obedience will always flow out of a heart of love and gratitude.

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How can we distinguish between truth and tradition? Is it possible?

Yes, there are a couple markers.

Man's tradition is external. God's truth is internal.

A tradition will involve something visible or audible.

But what God is doing in the deep-down intimacy of his relationship with you can be completely quiet, completely secret, just between you and him.

Also...

Man's tradition insists on ritual (or routine). God's truth insists on reality.

If you're engaged in an observance of some kind that doesn't have meaning for you, you don't really know or understand how or why it's supposed to accomplish what it's supposed to accomplish, it's actually kind of a superstition for you — that's a clue that it's a tradition, not a reflection of God's truth.

What DID Jesus think about religious traditions and regulations?

Again and again, throughout his earthly ministry, he called religious people to account for making their traditions the most important thing, and making relationship with God and relationship with other people the less important thing.

He knew our human nature, and our human nature is to fix on a formula, and get so focused on fulfilling that formula that we forget about matters of the heart, we forget about people and their hurts, we forget about how much God loves people, we forget that Jesus came not to fulfill religious policy, but to redeem people.

Nothing else is as important as loving God by *loving* people — Thing 1 and Thing 2.

What is sin?

Sin is anything that contradicts God's design for me.

The Apostle Paul says in **1 Corinthians 10:23**:

"Everything is permissible" — but not everything is beneficial.

"Everything is permissible" — but not everything is constructive.

So how can I tell if something is a sin?

I've got to be walking with Christ, listening for the voice of His Spirit within me, submitting my will to his, asking him to guide me, responding when he does, every step of the way.

Why doesn't God give us a simple list of do's and don'ts in the Scripture?

Because he WANTS us to have to turn to him, to walk with him, to listen to him, to tune in to him, to learn from him, to let him guide us, to draw closer to him, so he can show us, day by day, step by step, what WILL be beneficial to us, what WILL be constructive for us.

What does he long for?

A church full of people who come out of a religious cookie cutter looking and sounding identical, going through the motions, when their heart really isn't in it?

No.

He longs for us to be his family.

A community of believers devoted passionately to drawing closer to him, no matter what, and loving each other better as a result.

