

Psalm 19:7-11 (Opening)

*7 The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;*

*8 the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;*

*9 the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether.*

*10 More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.*

*11 Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

If I say the name Fred Phelps to you, would you know who I'm talking about?

What if I said Westboro Baptist Church, would that mean something?

Fred Phelps was the founding pastor at the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka Kansas. That "church" was known for its hateful picketing and protesting of military funerals and other high-profile gatherings since 1991. Mr. Phelps passed away this past week on March 19th.

In my opinion, Mr. Phelps was confused. While I agree with some of the things he and his congregation espoused, I don't agree with their methods of verbally attacking people, and especially the misdirected anger at military funerals.

This group wears a good name. They profess to be Christians, but their actions are anything but Christian. There was no love, no concern for anyone other than those who were inside their congregation. Even if the people they were protesting against were their enemies, there should have been love there, because Jesus tells us we should love our enemies. They had a good name, but were doing evil in the name of God.

People have been doing that for centuries, though. The Crusades, the Inquisition, witch trials in Europe and in North America. They were all done in the name of God, but I have to wonder how much good actually came of any of these actions. It's been said that the problems we've been facing since 2001 in the Middle East have been the result of the Crusades, so we're still reaping the harvest of those seeds that were sown so many centuries ago.

Last week we talked about how there are people out there in the world who do good things, even though they may not be Christians. Shocking, I know, but it's true. There are a few good people in the world.

The bad news is, they're not good enough to work their way into Heaven. It can't be done, because we all sin. Even if we don't know from reading the Bible, we know in our nature that some things are just wrong.

Now that Paul has pointed out that those who are outside the law are hopeless without God's grace and mercy, he's going to turn it back around to those who do have the law.

We'll pick up our reading in Romans 2, starting in verse 17.

Romans 2:17-29

¹⁷ But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God ¹⁸ and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; ¹⁹ and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹ you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. ²⁴ For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

²⁵ For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

The Jews figured since they were the children of Abraham, they had a special pass. After all, God chose **them**, not the other way around, right? They were, after all, the chosen race; they had “most favored nation” status with God! Most Jews felt the way Job did in Job 29:13-17.

Job was defending himself against the accusations of his so-called friends who said that he must have sinned; otherwise he wouldn't have ended up in such a bad situation. And he must have done something **really** bad to end up with boils all over his body. Talk about punishment! But Job says otherwise.

Job 29:13-17

- 13 The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me,
and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.*
- 14 I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
my justice was like a robe and a turban.*
- 15 I was eyes to the blind
and feet to the lame.*
- 16 I was a father to the needy,
and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know.*
- 17 I broke the fangs of the unrighteous
and made him drop his prey from his teeth.*

Job says “I did all the right things, and I did it all with the right attitude. I'm not being punished for sins. God is good, and eventually everything will work out.”

Job had the right attitude. He even sacrificed to God every day, just in case his kids had sinned at their daily party the day before.

But this attitude can turn on you.

I do the right things, therefore, I'm righteous.

I follow the rules, so I'm OK.

I go to church, so I'm a Christian.

Like my dad says, just because you're in a chicken coop, doesn't mean you're a chicken.

Paul points out in this part of his letter that just because you're a Jew on the outside, doesn't mean that you're doing what's right on the inside.

Paul says that circumcision, the outward sign of being a Jew, is useless if you don't follow the Law as it was given to the Jews more than a thousand years earlier. The problem was, the average Jew didn't know where God's Law ended and the extra laws that man put in place to protect people from breaking Gods Law began. The teachers of the Law had confused things so much that you couldn't tell anymore.

The problem with this kind of confusion is that it creeps in over time. It's sneaky. Yes, the Jews had problems with the Law and trusting God from the very beginning, that's why they had to wander around for 40 years so God could wait until the sinful unbelieving generation could die off in the wilderness. They weren't worthy to be allowed into the Promised Land.

But over time, the Priests and Levites would add laws to make things easier to understand for the average Jew. The idea was to make it easier to follow the Law by making it harder to break the Law. So they built what they called "fence laws" around the laws so you wouldn't accidentally break the real Law.

Over the centuries, they developed customs, to go along with their "fence laws". No doubt most of these customs started because someone thought it would be a good way of doing things, and over time it became the same as a law to them because "it's always been done that way".

By the time of Malachi, it had gotten so bad that people were pretty much doing whatever they thought was right, as far as sacrifice and worship was concerned.

Malachi 1:6-14

⁶ *“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, ‘How have we despised your name?’ ⁷ By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, ‘How have we polluted you?’ By saying that the LORD’s table may be despised. ⁸ When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts. ⁹ And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts. ¹⁰ Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. ¹¹ For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. ¹² But you profane it when you say that the Lord’s table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. ¹³ But you say, ‘What a weariness this is,’ and you snort at it, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD. ¹⁴ Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.*

God was telling the Jews through Malachi that they were missing the mark, big time! They weren’t even following the letter of the law. They

were doing what was right in their own eyes. They didn't see the sacrificial system as something that was helpful to them, so they used it to get rid of animals that they didn't want or need. Instead of giving to God what was best, the first fruits, they gave to God what was left, what they didn't want.

They were following their own hearts, not God's heart.

It's more than just wearing the right label. Labels are just an outward sign of what you say you are. And it's more than just doing right things. Doing right things is good, but it's not enough.

You have to do the right things with the right attitude, for the right reason.

So, we know what the right things to do are, but what's the right reason? Or as actors say to the director, "What's my motivation?"

Luke 10:25-28

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" ²⁷ And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

This is the introduction to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a story about doing the right thing for the right reason. What's the right reason? Because we love God, and since we love God, we know we need to love our neighbor.

But it's more than just loving your neighbor. Loving your neighbor, when your neighbor is just like you, is easy.

Matthew 5:43-48

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

After retiring from the military, the idea of loving my enemy seems really hard to swallow. But looking up the Greek word translated as enemies may clear things up a bit. The word is ech-**thros** and can be translated as enemy, or hated, or repulsive.

That kind of changes the face of who we’re supposed to love. Those people we can’t stand to be around, for whatever the reason. Those people that Mr. Phelps decided weren’t worth trying to convince were doing something wrong, but instead were targets to be pointed at and ridiculed.

I’ve been saying it for weeks, folks. We are all sinners. None of us are any better or worse than the other.

I want to close by reading a poem I found on the Internet written by Carol Wimmer, first published in 1988. It’s called “When I say ‘I am a Christian’”.

When I Say “I Am a Christian”

When I say, “I am a Christian”
I’m not shouting, “I’ve been saved!”
I’m whispering, “I get lost sometimes
That’s why I chose this way”

When I say, "I am a Christian"
I don't speak with human pride
I'm confessing that I stumble -
needing God to be my guide

When I say, "I am a Christian"
I'm not trying to be strong
I'm professing that I'm weak
and pray for strength to carry on

When I say, "I am a Christian"
I'm not bragging of success
I'm admitting that I've failed
and cannot ever pay the debt

When I say, "I am a Christian"
I don't think I know it all
I submit to my confusion
asking humbly to be taught

When I say, "I am a Christian"
I'm not claiming to be perfect
My flaws are far too visible
but God believes I'm worth it

When I say, "I am a Christian"
I still feel the sting of pain
I have my share of heartache
which is why I seek God's name

When I say, "I am a Christian"
I do not wish to judge
I have no authority
I only know I'm loved

Ephesians 2:1-10 (Closing)

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Questions

1. The Jews thought since they had the Law and tried to follow it, they were OK with God. But over their history, they kept falling away, getting trapped in their “adultery” with other gods. How can we as Christians keep from falling into the same traps the Jews fell into?
2. Take another look at Malachi 1:6-14. Think about times when you may have done the same thing that God, through Malachi, is rebuking the Jews for. What do you think would be the key thing to remember and apply to our lives from this scripture from Malachi?
3. Knowing that the word “enemy” in Matthew 5:43-48 implies more than just a military foe or someone that you fight against, and could be someone that you just can’t handle being around, how does that change the way you look at “love your enemy”?