

The late Ed Dobson was the prominent pastor of a megachurch in Grand Rapids. He was a good and gentle-hearted preacher, an active religious right political voice, a celebrated author, and a seeker. Diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease), he wrote his book, "*Prayers and Promises When Facing a Life-Threatening Illness*," which has helped many people.

In his retirement, Ed Dobson read *The Year of Living Biblically*, a best-selling account of one man's attempt to obey biblical commands as literally as possible. Dobson decided that if a non-religious Jew could do it, so could a practicing Christian.

And with that he set out to follow Old Testament laws about diet, clothing, and behavior. He ate kosher; he celebrated Jewish holidays; he prayed at a synagogue; he refrained from work and travel on the Sabbath, with the occasional exception of his grandchildren's soccer games. He obeyed the commandment about not trimming beards and grew one as long and shaggy as an Orthodox rabbi. And, he re-read the four gospels each week for a year.

All of this would have been an interesting and inoffensive experiment except that when Dobson was interviewed by USA Today and appeared on "Good Morning America," he acknowledged that in trying to live like Jesus, he had, on occasion, had a beer in a bar and voted for Democratic candidates.

Those admissions stirred up a stink storm. He was criticized for alcohol consumption in part because he was also the volunteer "Vice President for Spiritual Formation" at Cornerstone University – a school that prohibits drinking by faculty or students. And, he was chastised about his vote for Barack Obama because his positions didn't meet certain pro-life criteria.

Now, I don't want to get sidetracked on those specific issues, but clearly, for some folks in Ed Dobson's orbit, some rules could not be violated. There were right sides of issues, and there were wrong sides of issues.

There wasn't an appreciation for a thoughtful, committed, God-fearing, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving Christian who came to different conclusions about what faithful following of Jesus meant. He was condemned because he didn't follow the party line, didn't follow the established tradition, didn't "do the right thing." He wasn't pure.

It's the same criticism that the Pharisees have of Jesus himself in our gospel text this morning. Jesus is not following the rules.

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As we move from John and the Bread of Life discourse in the lectionary back to Mark for the upcoming weeks,

we find Jesus teaching and healing primarily in the little cluster of villages on the northeast banks of the Sea of Galilee. The religious leaders in Jerusalem caught wind of this and sent up a fact-finding delegation to investigate what Jesus was up to. What they discovered caused them great concern. The disciples of Jesus were not following the traditions of *purity*.

Pharisees are usually cast as the villains in the gospels. Typically, in our Christian circles, they have been conceived as religious fanatics who major in minutiae and are misguidedly concerned with things that seem superfluous.

But, in all fairness to the Pharisees, that caricature does them a disservice and obscures the issues. Pharisees were a reform movement within first-century Judaism. Their goal was to help ordinary people become more observant of the law (*both written and oral*) to affirm and reinforce their Jewish identity—to show they take their beliefs seriously.

Sidenote: you might ask yourself, what do I do to show that I take my faith seriously? How do I behave differently because of my faith? Pharisees had a good and quick answer: We follow the ritual purity that used to be reserved for the priests of Israel. We follow all 613 laws in the Hebrew Bible. And we have other rules that make sure we don't even get close to the 613.

You might think of it this way: if the speed limit is 55 mph, the Pharisees decided that they would all voluntarily not drive over 45 mph so they would never even accidentally break the law.

Jews in 1st c Palestine were a religious minority living in an occupied territory of the Roman Empire. Rome begrudgingly allowed them to exist, and they struggled to A) be faithful and B) not get in trouble with Rome, who could squash them like a bug.

The Pharisees' solution was to insist on rigorous obedience to the laws formerly reserved for the priests of Israel. E.g, the washing of hands, feet, and cooking utensils. That is how you kept the faith, and kept "pure."

So, if you got jostled by a Gentile in the marketplace, one way to mark identity and keep boundaries was a good ceremonial washing before you ate. It was a way of remembering who you were.

The problem comes when following a “law” or a tradition or a custom becomes the end all and be all, when it is elevated to the level of the Moral law or the Ten Commandments.

These laws, traditions, customs—and we all have them—should not be ends in themselves or litmus tests

but instead should move us toward being more faithful followers of God. Our practices should move us toward what we might call “Authentic Religion,” a pure and undefiled faith.

This is a massive topic, volumes have been written,, but for today, how about this:
Our text from James gives us guidance.

James 1:27 says this:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this:

to care for orphans and widows in their distress,
and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

A word about “widows and orphans.” The idiom “widows and orphans” is biblical shorthand for the powerless and vulnerable. In a patriarchal society, anyone not attached to a man was vulnerable and at risk. Notice James doesn’t talk about “widowers.” They are men, and in the patriarchy, they will be fine. They can take care of themselves.

No, it’s the weak an vulnerable that James tells us to care for. . .

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You might remember this story that I told three years ago . . . When I was in grade school, my mom got tickets for our family to see *Fiddler on the Roof* at Hancher Auditorium on the University of Iowa campus. We didn't realize until we got there that our tickets were in the front row, with barely any space between our knees and the orchestra pit. While those seats aren't the absolute best in the house because you are almost too close to the action as a kid, it seemed pretty awesome. Plus, it was very cool to be able to look into the orchestra pit and watch the musicians play.

Even as a young boy, I remember feeling the strain on Tevye and Golde. They were committed to the tradition of having a matchmaker find husbands for their five daughters.

At the same time, I also understood the five daughters who broke free from tradition and married for love. No doubt we can all hum a few measures of the opening song, “Tradition,” which spells out the roles each member of the family should have and sets the stage for the central tension of the play: the role of tradition and the question of whether or not one can break with tradition. Do we do what we’ve always done, or, do we act out of heartfelt love?

And maybe that's another way to think of the role our traditions play in "authentic religion": do our customs and habits help us love?

Does it help us love widows and orphans,
Does it help us love all those outside the power structures,
Does it help us love the last, the least, and the left out?

Let us do our part this week, and in the weeks to come,
to practice "authentic religion,"
and to make sure *love wins*.

Amen.