

The stakes could not be higher. It was Super Bowl 23. His team was down 3 points with three minutes left needing to go 92 yards to win. Some players felt the odds against them. As they gathered for the huddle some players looked nervous. Quarterback and leader Joe Montana was concentrating on calling the play, letting everyone know the time remaining and the situation. In what should've been an extremely tense moment, 'Joe Cool' as he was known, suddenly saw a celebrity in the stands and blurted out, "Isn't that John Candy?" Everybody relaxed immediately. Joe Cool broke the huddle and it was on.

What if Joe Montana never broke the huddle? If he let his nerves get to him and they just stayed there, huddled together. He certainly wouldn't have done anything to lose the game. Of course they would never win the game either. This morning we start a new sermon series called 'Breaking the Huddle'. We're not on the football field. But inside this church, in our own little congregation, with our favorite groups and people to talk to it can sometimes feel like we're stuck in a huddle. What if we never break our religious huddles? Would nothing bad ever happen to us? Would anything positive ever happen?

The Pharisees talked about in the gospel had their own huddle. These were hyper-religious people who were always on the lookout for violations of the law. The disciples eating bread without washing their hands sent red flags up. **"Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"** If only this was about hygiene. Instead the Pharisees were trying to make Jesus look bad. His disciples were breaking the law and Jesus was letting them get away with it. That made him a lawbreaker too.

The crowd watched closely to see how their religious leaders dealt with Jesus. They also were interested in seeing how Jesus treated the Pharisees. The crowds were a little beaten up by the Pharisees. This huddled religious group was always making them feel bad. Eat these foods, always wash your hands, and keep away from certain people. There were laws, and then it seemed there were laws on top of those laws. People started to get weighed down by all the laws, but they treated what the Pharisees said as if God were saying it. Organized religion had spoken. If you wanted to please God and show him you loved him you had to keep all these laws.

What passes for religion today? Many identify religion with keeping laws, laws of the country, moral laws of the Bible, laws of parents and teachers. Whatever religion is, it must involve laws. Organized religion sometimes gives off the idea that if you keep these laws God will be pleased with you. You'll be able to say, 'Look what I did for you God.' Give to the poor. Try and not swear so much when talking. Love everyone. Talk of peace not war. Vote for Christian principles and back Christian politicians. Volunteer to serve in some community organization. Eventually religion is identified with keeping laws and living a moral life.

Don't misunderstand, there's nothing wrong with keeping the law. There's nothing wrong with living Christian principles and morals. But do you see the problem? If Christianity, if religion is keeping laws and living a moral life what saves a person? Too many people, maybe even you, have confused the issue thinking Christianity and religion are nothing more than living a moral life. Keeping the law, following rules, and living a moral life becomes religion. It becomes what people think can save them. We make up rules, identify laws, and put ourselves into religious huddles where we can feel safe. We measure other people against our laws and rules. We get into our religious huddle with other people who believe the same. We talk Christian morality and politics, of returning to better times in history when God's laws were appreciated and followed, and nod along as everyone agrees.

With every new law the Pharisees added the people felt another burden. Some started to just fake it, go through the motions. They forgot all the reasons they were keeping the law in the first place. **"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."** Jesus cut to the truth, they were merely play acting. The Pharisees and the people didn't care about clean or unclean. They didn't care about keeping God's laws. They were too busy pretending to care. They had substituted organized religion for what God truly wanted.

You've known people who go through the motions of religion. They don't get into coming to church. It's too boring. It's always the same. The music isn't peppy enough. The preacher preaches too long. The church is dark. Some come anyway because it's expected or forced upon them. "Have to give God his hour this week. Have to say my prayers. Have to take communion because that's what good members do." It's just going through the motions.

If you're the one going through the motions, know that it's never going to help you. Jesus assures you of that. **"Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'"** Just showing up at church and sitting in the row and mouthing along with the words gets you nothing. God isn't pleased. It's like washing the outside of a dirty bowl and saying it's clean enough to eat out of. Jesus says you could spend all day trying to wash yourself, follow the rules, staying in your religious huddles, but it would never matter. Following the rules or going through the motions in your religious huddles never gets rid of sin. You can't scrub away the sin on the inside.

People see organized religion as the problem. People who only look religious, but don't really care about anything to do with real religion. It often describes people who are more hypocrite and Pharisees than anything. These are people just going through the motions hoping God will give them a pass into heaven based on what they do. And if you think that applies to everyone but you, then you need to hear Jesus clearer. **"Listen to me, everyone, and understand this."** Everyone has a little hypocrite in them. Everyone is at one time or another a little Pharisee trying to earn their way into heaven.

Jesus takes on anything that masquerades as religion. God is after hearts. Hearts need to be cleansed and only Jesus can do that. Jesus cleanses us of any lasting thoughts of doing good works or keeping the law to get right with God. Jesus cleanses us of any hypocrisy or religious huddling. Jesus cleanses our heart and soul. He did it by keeping every one of God's laws perfectly. He never went through the motions. He never showed pride, greed, or selfishness. He was completely perfect. And on a Friday called Good Friday he went to the cross. It was Jesus versus religion, and Jesus won. He pointed people away from religion as the Pharisees practiced it with its rules and laws, and pointed them towards God's grace. **"Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."** James said in the second lesson. The word is the message of forgiveness through Jesus. He took your imperfections and uncleanness and gave you his perfection and cleanness. Our hearts are new in Christ.

Now it's time to break the huddle and have a Christ centered faith which worships God with hearts purified in Christ. We please God by living in Jesus' forgiveness and love. Jesus wants us to continue to investigate what pleases God and do it. Never to earn anything but out of love for him. We can even set up rules and laws as congregations and families. But where God has not spoken we must not hold someone else to it as if God had. We also must be willing to change for the sake of someone else. The huddle is broken and in Jesus versus religion, religion loses, Jesus wins. We've got a Christ centered faith.

With 34 seconds left in Super Bowl 23 Joe Montana, with his calm cool demeanor broke the huddle one final time and threw a touchdown pass to win the game. Breaking the huddle was the only way to victory. Let's break the religious huddle today. Center our faith in Christ alone. And with Jesus' cool calm sacrificing love we can break our huddles and discover he's won the victory.