

"THE DANGERS OF TRADITIONS."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden

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Texts for the Sermon: Mark 7:1-13

Introduction.

Our son Reed has a new job when he gets back to Azusa that involves driving students on weekend outdoor adventures. Since he will be driving more than 15 students he has to get a Class B driver's license. He took the test Friday morning borrowing Brian Bunn's school bus. At the exam location there was a man there with a big check list to make sure Reed did everything just right, the pre-inspection and then the driving test with all kinds of tricky situations.

How do you feel doing something with someone standing there with a check list ready to mark down everything you do wrong? Have you ever known someone who is critical, who has a critical spirit, who notices everything and is quick to point it out, especially the bad things, the mistakes, the failures, or just the things they don't like or don't approve of? The kind of people about whom it's said, "they would complain if they were hung with a new rope."

Imagine if this morning in the back three pews there were a bunch of guys in dark suits, senior pastors, denominational officials, seminary professors all from Grand Rapids with check lists: did each member bring their Bible, did we sing out of the gray Psalter Hymnal, did we use the piano or organ, did I use the right liturgy for the baptisms, were the women wearing pants, were the kids behaving right, were the elders wearing ties?

That's what happened to Jesus. The senior pastors and seminary professors from Jerusalem showed up with their check list to do a surprise inspection of this Jesus and His disciples. Their check list was this book called the *Mishnah* or the oral tradition, the oral laws. I'm serious, when the Pharisees criticized Jesus, "Why do your disciples not walk according to *the tradition of the elders*, but eat with defiled hands?" they were quoting this Mishnah.

This Mishnah is a compilation of the oral laws passed down from the time of Moses. The Mishnah was called a fence around the Torah, the first five books of Moses. They believed the Torah was too ambiguous or vague. The list started small but evolved and grew over the centuries to eight hundred pages of small print.

Starting on page 604 there are 200 pages of oral laws just on washing, cleansing and purity including how to wash correctly, how far up the arm to wash, how much water to use, from what sources and out of what vessels and how to clean those vessels.

We are given a glimpse of the state of the Jewish religion in the time of Jesus and how much things had changed from the days of Moses, from worship based on the Ten Commandments and the Psalms to worship based on washing hands and pots and pans; from worshipping through loving God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength to worshipping through inspections of hands and dishes.

The most highly favored nation on earth to whom, in the words of Paul, “belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. 5 ... the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all” (Romans 9:4-5).

They walked through the Red Sea, they received the law from the hand of God at Mt. Sinai, they were given the tabernacle and the temple, the priesthood and the sacrifices. They were given Moses, Joshua, Samuel and David, and a whole host of faithful prophets.

No nation on earth had more spiritual privileges or was more blessed by God, by the very presence of God, yet no nation on earth more misused and abused and neglected the privileges God had given them.

They turned the grace of God into works, they turned the law of God into the laws of men, they turned love into legalism. They turned broken and contrite hearts into washing hands and pans. They sacrificed heart-worship on the altar of lip-service. They traded clean consciences for clean hands, for externals that couldn't take away guilt, shame and sin.

No wonder Jesus turned the tables on the Pharisees. You ask me, “Why do my disciples break the tradition of the elders?” I ask you, “Why do you reject God's law for the sake of your own traditions?”

Mark 7:6-8 “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,
“‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;
7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’
8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

These Pharisees who considered themselves to be the great defenders of the Bible were being accused by Jesus of actually being Bible-breakers.

In the words of one commentator, “the handwashers were parent abusers; the people who said grace at the table did not practice grace at home” (Dale Bruner, *Matthew, Vol. II*, p. 541).

They didn't openly deny the fifth commandment to honor our parents. But to get around having to use their money and possessions to care for their parents they would declare that their money was “*corban*” or given over to a sacred purpose, to a higher and holy purpose. In this way they could then say that it belonged to God and they could no longer use it for worldly purposes like providing for their parents basic needs.

Another commentator described it this way, “A man goes through the formality of vowing something to God, not that he may give it to God, but in order to prevent some other person from having it” (T.W. Manson, quoted in James Edwards, *Mark*, p. 210).

They set up a human tradition and then elevated it to a higher duty than their duty to God commanded in Scripture. How wicked is it to zealously keep one of their made up laws and neglect one of God's laws?

They acted like they were being high and holy and zealous for their God, like they were all about God's glory, when in their hearts they were disobeying God's Word in the name of being selfish and greedy and covetousness.

Application and Conclusion.

The challenge of a text like this is not so much what it meant then, but what does it mean for us now. How do we apply the teaching of this passage to ourselves and our lives today?

This is a humbling passage as it gives us a pretty clear picture of our fallen sinful human nature and how we turn worship of the true God into religion. This text shows us where religions come from, they are the creation of man. Religions are man's attempt to get to God or to earn God's favor or to impress God or to make ourselves more righteous.

This text is a heart-searching text as Jesus asks questions that are scary to answer. This text gets past our heads, it gets past just information or knowledge or learning more about the life of Jesus and gets to the heart of the matter, to what separates Christianity from all religions.

The warning of this text is that if it could happen to the people with the greatest privileges and advantages, it could happen to anyone. And that warning needs to be sounded just as loudly today as in Jesus day.

Let me close with four applications of this text for us today.

First, this text reminds us that Scripture has absolute authority over all human and manmade traditions and laws. An essential tenet of our evangelical faith is sola scriptura or only Scripture. Scripture is the Word of God and as the truth from God it is our final authority concerning all matters of life and faith.

Jesus completely nullifies the Jewish oral tradition that grew up around the law. Jesus clears away all the additions to elevate the Word of God back to its central place of authority.

We must beware of adding anything to God's Word, especially anything we make necessary for salvation or holiness. Adding anything to God's Word says God's Word is not perfect, and needs our help. Adding anything to God's Word robs God's Word of its authority.

Revelation 22:18 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

What God commands, let us love and obey with all our heart. What God has not commanded, let us use as is helpful but never elevate it to Scripture or as necessary for salvation.

Second, this text asks us, what are our traditions that we have elevated above His Word?

Movies, dancing, cards, what we do or don't do on Sunday, how we keep our yards and gardens, where our kids go to school, whether we drive American, who our kids marry, how we vote, elevating cleanliness to an idol, rules of behavior that aren't in Scripture, things that make us feel self-righteous, that we think impress God and earn His favor. Any others come to mind?

We have a tradition here of standing for the reading of God's Word. But we don't elevate it to a status above the Word we are reading. We do it partly as a way of expressing honor and respect, like standing when a woman enters a room or when the president of the US walks in a room. Do

we judge a senior saint or a person with a disability who can't stand? Are they less of a Christian? Do we judge a pastor who for some strange reason decides on a particular occasion to have us remain seated for the reading of God's Word? God's Word does not command it, so it's a tradition or ceremony of man. It isn't wrong to do unless we make it rule of righteousness with which to bind the conscience of others.

Third, this text asks us, do we ever nullify the Word of God for the sake of ourselves?

Do we deny Genesis One and Two or that the Red Sea actually parted or that the sun actually stood still or that Jonah was swallowed by a whale to maintain our credibility with non-Christians?

Do we deny those Scriptures that make us look foolish to outsiders or aren't PC?

Do we wink at sin to keep from being accused of being a fanatic or a prude or a do-gooder?

Do we go along with jokes that totally dishonor God or God's truths?

Do we elevate man's opinion above God's opinion?

Do we find some parts too hard to obey, or too painful or too costly to obey?

Do we strain out the gnats and swallow the camels?

If people who profess to be Christian don't believe or like what the Bible teaches they should call themselves by some other name rather than Christian.

Fourth, this text asks us, do our outer practices match our inner attitudes? Do our worship and our offerings and our service reflect the inner reality of our hearts? Are we hypocrites, phonies, posers? Or are we genuine, sincere, the real deal, walking the talk?

Jesus hates self-righteousness and He confronts it wherever He sees it. Those who think they are better than sinners and who think they are just fine the way they are and can get into heaven on their own merits will not be saved. Their worship is in vain.

Holiness is found in obedience to God's Word, not in conformity to man's opinion. Holiness comes from the heart, it's found in the humility and integrity.

It's holiness when we honor God with all our heart. It's good if we worship God with our lips, but only if your hearts worship first. It's ungodly hypocrisy when we honor God only in outward show or external behavior, but harbor anger, bitterness, jealousy, envy, a critical spirit, gossip or gluttony or greed in our hearts.

We can say all the right things. Our lips can recite the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer and the Heidelberg Catechism, but what matters is the heart.

The heart of the problem is our heart. We can bow our head, close your eyes and bend our knees, we can fold your hands or raise them in the air, but if our heart isn't in it, it's all vain and worthless.

The rich young ruler did all the externals and even kept the Ten Commandments, all but one. He kept back in his heart covetousness and idolatry, the love of money. The love of anything over God says God doesn't have our hearts.

It does no good to bring our bodies to church and leave our hearts at home (J.C. Ryle, *Mark*). It does no good to receive the applause and approval of those around us and have the displeasure of God.

When Jesus looks straight into my hearts what does He see? Does He see humility and brokenness, a repentant spirit, a true desire for more Christlikeness, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, a desperate pleading for God's mercy and grace, a longing for the courts of the Lord, a yearning for truth, a prayer for God to do a new and fresh work in me?

By the way, Reed passed his test. But it wasn't by his own doing, it was by grace, some from the tester and a lot from God. Salvation and grace is not found in lists and manmade rules or external things, it's found in the righteousness of Christ and in holiness according to humble obedience to God's Word.

May the worship that's offered in this place never be vain or hypocritical or insincere or with our lips only or only for outward show. May our worship here be humble, heart-felt, increasing in love for God and for each other and full of grace, both given and received.

May our worship be God-glorifying, Christ-exalting, Spirit-filled, Biblically grounded, sin-confessing, joy-spreading, and soul-saving.

Prayer: Holy and righteous Father in heaven, have mercy on us all and begin with me. Forgive and remove my hypocrisy and all the ways I don't practice what I preach. Make all of our hearts soft to the truth of your Holy Word and give all of us a greater hunger and thirst to love you and know you and worship you and follow you with all our hearts. In the words of Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 36:25-27 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

In the name of Jesus and for the sake of His glory, Amen.