

## 44. Truth or traditionalism?

August 28, 2016

In America, though it is relatively short, we have many great traditions, such as, the Fourth of July Celebration, Apple Pie, Fried Chicken, Hamburgers, Hotdogs, Potato Chips, Macaroni and Cheese, Baseball, Basketball, Football (not soccer), Ice Hockey, Thanksgiving, Labor Day, etc. So many great traditions.

However, these traditions should not override the truth that guide us in living. But there were and are some people who choose to place their own traditions over what God tells us in the Bible. It is known as "Traditionalism". Dictionary.com insightfully defines it as follows: "adherence to tradition as authority, especially in matters of religion."

This morning we are going to meet the scribes and the Pharisees who came down from Jerusalem to the region of Galilee to confront Jesus, not because He was violating the Laws of God that were given to them through Moses, but because He was purposely violating their man-made worthless traditions. Jesus became their "Public Enemy No. 1."

### A. RITUAL, RELIGION, BUT NO RELATIONSHIP

*Mark 7:1-5 Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. 2 Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. 3 For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. 4 When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches. 5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"*

This was another "official delegation" of religious leaders from Jerusalem, coming to evaluate the ministry of Jesus. We saw a previous delegation in Mark 3, and they pronounced a harsh, condemning judgment against Jesus. This delegation from Jerusalem has already made up their mind about Jesus before they met Him.

The concept of evaluating Jesus' ministry was fine. But they did not evaluate Jesus against the measure of God's Word. They wrongfully evaluated Him against the measure of their own religious traditions.

These religious leaders speak of elaborate ceremonial washings, not washing for the sake of cleanliness and personal hygiene. The observant Jews of that time strictly observed a rigid and extensive ritual of washing before meals.

For these ceremonial washings, special stone vessels of water were kept, because ordinary water might be unclean. To wash your hands in a special way, you started by taking at least enough of this water to fill one and one-half egg shells. Then, you poured the water over your hands, starting at the fingers and running down towards your wrist. Then you cleansed each palm by rubbing the fist of the other hand into it. Then you poured water over your hands again, this time from the wrist towards the fingers. A really strict Jew would do this not only before the meal, but also between each course.

If they were as concerned about cleansing their hearts as they were about their hands, they would be really godly men. We always want to think that there are some rituals we can do to cleanse ourselves – like praying or reading the Bible extra or going to church more than once a month. Wrong!!!

Jesus made it clear in the Sermon on the Mount, from Matthew 5-7, that true holiness is a matter of inward affection and attitude, not just outward actions and associations.

It is true that some traditions are helpful as reminders of our rich heritage, or as “glue” to bind generations, but we must constantly beware that tradition should not take the place over truth from the Word of God. It does us good to examine our church as well as individual traditions in the light of His Word and to be courageous enough to correct it if we are wrong.

*Mark 7:6-13 He answered and said to them, “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 And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ 8 “For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.” 9 He said to them, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. 10 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ 11 But you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban”—’ (that is, a gift to God), 12 then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, 13 making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do.”*

Jesus defended His disciples and systematically exposed the hypocrisy of their accusers. The first thing He did was to quote from the prophet Isaiah 29:13, and then He brought the Law of Moses in Ex. 20 and 21 to them. How could the Pharisees argue with the Law and the Prophets? They couldn't.

The Jewish religious leaders came to honor their traditions far above the Word of God. We may say, “Oh, that was the first century Pharisees. We don't do that.” Yes, people still do, even within the rank of Christianity. Some believers would rather honor their denominational rules and regulations more than God's Word. They are the ones who tell the congregation that their denominations' guidelines should be honored above the Word of God which they consider to be an old ancient book that is no longer relevant.

For example, some denominations emphasize speaking in tongues so much that if you don't speak in tongues, either you are not really saved or you are an inferior Christian. And some other denominations insist on having baptism done according to their denominations' rules and within their church locations to be saved. And there are other denominations that made a doctrine that is known as “Transubstantiation” which means the bread and the fruit of the vine that we take at communion are the actual body and blood of Christ. Wrong again!

*Mark 7:14-16 When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, “Hear Me, everyone, and understand: 15 There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him,*

*those are the things that defile a man. 16 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!"*

This is not to say that there are not defiling things that we can take into ourselves – such as pornography and harmful illegal drugs. But in this specific context, Jesus spoke about ceremonial cleanliness in regard to food, and He anticipated when all foods would be declared kosher.

Foods or unwashed hands do not make our hearts unclean, because they are already unclean to begin with due to our sinful nature. The only way we can have our hearts cleansed is through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Our Lord's reply to their charge began with an accusation against them. "Corban" means "The gift to God." It is nothing more than a legal loophole, so that they don't have to support their own aging parents. But at the same time, it makes them look ultra pious.

Tradition deals with ritual, while God's truth deals with reality. Tradition brings empty words to the lips, but truth penetrates the heart and changes the life. Actually, tradition robs a person from the power of the Word of God.

## **B. WE DON'T GET IT**

*Mark 7:17-23 When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. 18 So He said to them, "Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, 19 because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?" 20 And He said, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. 21 For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, 22 thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within and defile a man."*

Jesus declared boldly to the multitudes that sin comes from the heart, not from the eating. It is what comes out of the mouth that defiles us, not what goes in.

*Matthew 12:34 Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.*

His explanation seems obvious to us, but we must remember that these twelve men had been brought up under the strict Jewish dietary law that categorized all foods as either "clean" or "unclean". In fact, Acts 10:14 suggests that Peter kept a kosher tradition for years, even after he had heard this truth from Christ. It is not easy to change our religious traditions.

This dramatic lesson on "truth vs. traditionalism" could only irritate the Jewish religious leaders more and make them want to silence Jesus once and for all. This increased opposition was the reason He departed from the crowded places and took His disciples into the Gentile territory.

## **C. A TRUE GENTILE BELIEVER**

*Mark 7:24-30 From there He arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and wanted no one to know it, but He could not be hidden. 25 For a woman whose young daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him, and she came and fell at His feet. 26 The woman was a*

*Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth, and she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. 27 But Jesus said to her, "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." 28 And she answered and said to Him, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs." 29 Then He said to her, "For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter." 30 And when she had come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter lying on the bed.*

Not only did Jesus teach that no foods were unclean, but He practiced His teaching by going into Gentile territory which is located some 50 miles away. This is the only time Jesus left Israel and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Sidon had been the home of the wicked queen Jezebel in 1 Kings 16. We might ask, "For what?" Because Jesus had a divine appointment with this woman and to set her daughter free from the demons.

Because of their pagan idol worship in that region, her daughter was exposed to that idol worship that was controlled by demons. So, please don't get into the New Age concept, Yoga and Transdental Meditation practices with Christian packaging. No matter what kind of names or who endorses, they are from the pit of hell.

The previous incident shows Jesus wiping out the distinction between clean and unclean foods. Can it be that here, in symbol, we have Him wipe out the difference between the Jews and the Gentile people? Yes, at the same time, Jesus in His foreknowledge knew that this Gentile woman would come to Him. He wanted to challenge her faith in Him.

For the Jews, one of the worst things you could call a Jew is a Gentile dog. That is what they generally thought of Gentiles. Actually, there were some rabbis who declared that there were Gentiles existing in the world to fuel the hell fire.

However, Jesus used the words "the little dogs" in an endearing way. It could be translated as "puppy." But it is easy for us to think that Jesus was giving her a hard time.

In my opinion, it is a stark comparison between the religious Jewish leaders who have been studying the OT day in day out in their lives completely missed out on a great opportunity to greet Jesus who is God Incarnate, but this Gentile woman who was considered as worthless by the Jews, came to Jesus with genuine faith in Him. They had a religion without God in their hearts, but this Gentile woman had God in her heart without a religion.

Speaking of praying for one's child to the Lord, moms and dads, grandmas and grandpas, you might have wayward kids and grandkids. Don't give up on them. Continuously bring them to Christ. Would He listen to your persistent prayers for them? Yes, a thousand times yes. He is willing to grant your prayer request. If your son or daughter comes to their senses, God will speak to their hearts to return to Him and to you. Don't stop praying for them.

It is significant that the two times in the Gospel record when Jesus commended "great faith," He was responding to the faith of the Gentiles, not Jews: this Syro-Phoenician woman and the Roman centurion.

#### **D. APPLICATIONS**

1) Great faith is the faith that takes God at His Word and will not let go until He meets the need. Great faith can lay hold of even His slightest encouragement and turn it into a fulfilled promise from Him. And the Bible is filled with great encouragement from Him.

2) God is not impressed with any type of self-formatted religion. But He loves to see us coming to Him in a simple faith of Him, humility and dependence.