

“TRADITIONS OF THE ELDERS”

by Steve Hammond, Sunday, January 27, 2019

Mark 7:1-20 at NFBC

//5 And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” 6 And he 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 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.”//

—Mark 7:5-8 ESV

This whole chapter is about the “traditions of the elders” back in Jesus’ day. It’s a chapter I was not looking forward to and wondered if I should avoid it altogether. What interest is it to us how the Jews went about pouring water over their hands, first with the fingers up, then with the fingers down, all having nothing to do with germs and soap, but everything to do with making one ‘spiritually’ clean?

It would be one thing, maybe, if these were laws from the book of Moses or the prophets, but these rituals were instituted during the 70 year exile in Babylon. And they eventually became as important to the Jewish society as the law of Moses itself. It wasn’t just hand washing either. They had instructions for washing pots and cups and numerous other items according to the “traditions of the elders.”

What interest is that to us? Surely we don’t have any such things in our culture today. Right? Well, at first I didn’t think so. We certainly have traditions of washing hands and dishes, but for entirely different reasons. I can’t see Jesus, were he to come into our society today, seeking to set a precedent for not washing one’s hands and utensils before eating, serving food and performing operations.

Yet Jesus was very taken by this matter in his day. So maybe we should look at it all the more carefully. And see if there’s a connection for our day as well.

Actually this matter of “traditions of the elders” is at work in virtually every culture. It’s practically what a culture *is*. It’s not all bad either. A lot of what’s passed down from the past to the present by one’s elders are great things for which we should be grateful. On the national scale we have things like shooting off fireworks on the 4th of July. That’s

not a law; it's a tradition. Though some might hold it as important as a law. (I know they do in my neighborhood.) Eating with a fork is a tradition. Not everyone does that. (When everyone you know follows a tradition, sometimes that makes it hard to know it *is* a tradition.) And eating pizza by biting the small part of the "V" (or even having a "V") is a tradition of sorts. Not a very profound one, but still.

We might also have traditions on the more local or personal levels. Your household might say, "Love-love" for example, instead of "Good-bye." (I love-love that one, which I've seen in one of your families here.)

But what was it Jesus was standing up against? And what in our day might be of similar concern to Jesus, . . . and hopefully to us, to correct?

Instead of just listing culprits, I am going to list what I believe is underneath Jesus' concerns. So then maybe we will be able to evaluate for ourselves the proper and improper place of our own "traditions of the elders."

1. Where are God's commandments when it comes to your traditions?

//You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men./* ---Mark 7:8

The Jews in Jesus' day had blurred the lines between what was God's law and what was man's mere tradition. This allowed the traditions to become the means of measuring what and *who* was "clean" and "right" and "righteous." The rituals themselves, most of them, were harmless. But the way they were elevated and employed became a burden and a barrier for most of the Jewish population. There were so many of these things, and they could be so elaborate, that your ordinary fisherman and tax collector fell into the category of the generic "sinners." Whereas the more full time devotion of the Pharisees could be applied to the keeping of all these traditional "dos and don'ts."

Keep in mind, the word "Pharisee" is not a kind word to our ear today, because we hear it through the megaphone of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But while that Gospel was being lived out, a Pharisee was a very respected holy man. And a good portion of that respect came from the fact that he in fact did keep these "traditions of the elders" better than anyone else. It took the critical eye of Jesus, though, to put their supposed 'righteousness' in the proper light. And that light came from remembering

the difference between the traditions of men and the commandments of God.

So, how are we today at making these distinctions? How do we measure what is “clean” and “right” and even “righteous” in our society today?

I am afraid we are as lost in this understanding as was the Jewish society in Jesus’ day. For one thing, people today hardly even know what the commandments of God say. “Murder” is about the only one that comes readily to people’s lips. “Adultery” is on people’s minds, but it’s not spoken of much as a measure anymore. It’s too hard to tell what adultery is when marriage itself isn’t even a priority in people’s sexual relationships. Adultery is seen more in the light of one’s personal standard or preference in relationships. It’s a tradition.

On the other hand, we have some seemingly trivial matters held up as if they were the law of God in determining who among us is in the right and who is to be avoided. Just consider the national hot water 15 year old Nick Sandmann got into as he was so easily judged by his wearing a red MAGA hat and selective video shown on Twitter. For a while it was a forgone conclusion that what was being reported was news, when in fact it was gossip. This is because the distinction between news and gossip had long ago been blurred. And the loss of that distinction most likely came about when the concern for reporting what is true took a back seat to a concern for reporting what people want to hear. (Not to mention the money people want to make.) And, of course, that goes back to the commandment of God regarding “false witness.”

How many other false measures do we have that are based more on our traditions of men than on the standards of God? Plenty I’m sure. May I mention a few key words, which people today use to measure who is clean and unclean? Democrats vs Republicans; Rich vs Poor; Black vs White; Old White Men vs everyone; Women vs Men; Vegans vs Meat eaters; Gun owners vs Prius owners; I could go on. But I could get in hot water trouble quickly if I appear to fall one way or the other on all these seemingly vital measures of righteousness.

This is what happens when we forget the foundational, commanding word of God. Do you know the commands of God? And do you know the difference between them and the traditions of men?

2. Where is your heart when it comes to your personal habits and traditions?

//And he 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 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."/ // ---Mark 7:6-7

It's not wrong to have traditions and habits when they're in the right place. But, along with our knowing the commandments of God, another measure is the knowing of your own heart. Where is our heart when it comes to all these "traditions of the elders"?

In Jesus' day the Pharisee's hearts were committed to these "commandments of men," not because they brought themselves or anyone closer to God, but because they profited financially from such things as Corban (a vow which "could be promised to God in such a way that property or earnings could still be used for oneself, but not for anybody else, including one's parents.")

So, rather than have Jesus and Isaiah point to our hearts with a similar exposure for contempt, we should examine the things we are doing by tradition and habit, right along with lots of other people, good people it would seem. Don't let the fact that "everyone else is doing it" be your source of assurance that it must be okay. Let the word of God speak to you. And let your own heart tell you whether it's being brought closer to God, or being driven away from God, as you practice traditions which other people do without blinking an eye.

This could involve the watching of television, the use of our computer or phone. This could involve our choices of food, choices of words, or songs to listen to.

This could even include our asking ourselves, "Why do I go to church?" Do we know why we give an offering, read the Bible and pray? God's word does command these things, and being human we can do them out of habit and tradition. But if that's all there is to it, or if what's "in it for us" does not include our heart being drawn toward God, then our offerings amount to junk mail and our prayers have all the appeal of a telemarketer going through the motions.

Now, I must take the time for one more point, for it is the most important of all.

3. Is there any tradition that can make you pure as the white driven snow? No. But there is Christ crucified.

//Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, 19 since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?'' (Thus he declared all foods clean.) 20 And he said, ''What comes out of a person is what defiles him. 21 For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.''' ---Mark 7:18b-23

The cross isn't spoken of here directly; it's only chapter 7 in Mark's Gospel and the story isn't there yet. But it does speak about what makes for clean and what makes for unclean. Our hearts are themselves unclean. This is evident by what comes out of them. And there's nothing we can eat or drink or watch or practice by heart that is going to change that condition.

But there is Jesus. Jesus can simply declare what foods are clean or unclean. And just as he can do that with food, he can do that with our hearts. Not by cheap words. Not by trivial or invented traditions of men. But by the word of God, the word by which he created the universe. And by the Word incarnate by which he redeemed sinners.

God cleanses our heart through the shed blood of his own Son on the cross. That is no mere tradition. That is certainly no commandment of men. That is the unique act of God's love demonstrated for our salvation. And you and I must apprehend it by the love and grace of Jesus.

Like any good family there's ample room for there being a tradition of eating meals together (washing hands beforehand, of course) and the doing of chores and having fun. But tradition has nothing to do with *being* members of the family in the first place. That must come to each of us in the very personal way of love.

May this Jesus and the cross be at the center of your heart, after which you will be invited to keep all the commands of God. And by which you will be able to sort out the traditions of the elders.