

TRADITION VERSUS THE WORD OF GOD

Mark 7:1-23

Key Verses: 7:6-8

He replied, "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.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

In a book I am currently reading, the author who is the pastor of a church said that he admired a famous golfer named Tiger. He especially liked the way Tiger appeared on TV with all three buttons on his shirt always buttoned up. The pastor concluded that Tiger was a meticulous, faithful and sincere person. Little did he know that Tiger sometimes didn't keep his shirt buttoned up. How people look outwardly is often different from what is inside his heart.

Even among believers, some people follow man-made traditions in order to look religious before the eyes of men rather than obey the word of God. The Pharisees in today's passage were like that. But the life of faith is not about looking holy before men; it is a matter of the heart before the eyes of God. And the word of God can help us to purify our hearts when we repent our sins based on the word of God. Let us think about how we can keep our hearts pure before God by living by the word of God in our daily life.

I. THE TRADITIONS OF THE JEWS (1-8)

Look at verses 1-2. *The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed.* A team of Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus who was doing the work of God in Galilee. It wasn't because they were interested in the work of God he was doing or because they wanted to learn from Jesus. They were dispatched by the religious authorities in Jerusalem to investigate Jesus to find basis for a charge against him. They were there to gather information about Jesus to use against him. Why? The Jewish leaders were alarmed by the rising popularity of Jesus. In fact, they had already decided to eliminate Jesus, considering him as a potential threat to their authority (Jn 5:18). So they followed him and watched him for everything he did. They did not find any basis in Jesus to accuse him with. But they found something in the behavior of his disciples. What was it? They noticed that his disciples did not wash their hands before they ate. The disciples were always hungry and they must have forgotten to wash their hands before eating. So what was the big deal about that? Were the religious leaders worried about their health?

The religious leaders were shocked to find that Jesus' disciples neglected the ceremonial washing of their hands. The author Mark comments in verses 3-4: *The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of*

cups, pitchers and kettles. The traditions of the Jewish elders were different from the Law of Moses in the Bible. These traditions began when the Jewish leaders were concerned with the spiritual conditions of God's people and wanted to help them to live as a holy nation. They were written to counter the influence of the Greek culture that was forced on them by Alexander the Great around 167 B.C. The traditions of the Jewish elders were part of a national piety movement. Like most traditions, they had good intentions. But over time, more and more items were added to the traditions and by Jesus' time, they had 613 traditions to observe. The list included 248 do's and 365 don'ts. If anyone wanted to do something, they had to consult with the religious authorities to check if his action would somehow violate one of the traditions. A person who wanted to visit his friend who was not feeling well, for example, would have been dismayed to find out that walking more than 0.75 mile on Sabbath was forbidden. In the process of trying to observe them, the spirit of the original traditions was gone and they had become invisible chains around their neck to bind them. The people lived under the heavy burden of the legalism because of the traditions.

Look at verse 5. *So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"* The Pharisees used the traditions of the elders to control their people. The problem was that even the Pharisees could not keep all the traditions, at least in the ways they were originally intended (Ac 15:10). They seemed to keep them alight but only outwardly. Their hearts were not there. They observed them as rituals and they thought they were good. In other words, they became hypocrites. For example, the ceremonial washing of hands had the original meaning in helping them to consecrate themselves before God. But by Jesus' time, it was practiced only as a ritual. They held out their hands with their fingertips pointing upward and poured water over their hands until it ran down their wrists. The amount of water used was as little as an eggshell full. It was like a comedy show. It served no hygienic purpose either. Above all, it did not help them to consecrate their hearts before God. But they had many other similar traditions, such as ceremonial washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles (4). In this way, the traditions lost their original intent. Instead, the traditions became a political tool for the religious leaders.

What did Jesus tell them? Let us read together verses 6-8. *He replied, "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.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."* Jesus told them that they should honor God with their hearts. God cannot be honored if we praise him only with our lips. He cannot be honored if we worship him by going through motions when our hearts are far from him. He cannot be honored if we let go of his commands and follow man-made traditions.

"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain..." God wants us to worship him from our hearts. He wants us to love him from our hearts. He does not want from us a lip service. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Jesus says that "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:24). That's why God did not accept Cain and his offering. Cain's heart was not right.

When we first accept Jesus as our Savior, we are so happy to be forgiven of our sins and to receive eternal life. We praise him from our hearts. We shed tears of joy and gratitude. But over time, we tend to lose our first love. Our hearts become lukewarm. We often go through motions rather than deeply seek the Lord and worship him from our hearts. We criticize the Pharisee for their hypocrisy but we often find ourselves doing the same things they did. We have to remember the traditions of the elders began with good intentions.

Traditions and cultural heritages are good because their original intentions are honorable. But as time passes, people forget about the original intentions and follow them habitually. In our society, many people get excited about Christmas and Easter without thinking about the true meaning of them. To some people, these traditions are no more than commercial opportunities. We should not let go of the commands of God for traditions. The word of God is life-giving and everlasting. The Bible is old, but it is applicable to all generations. This country was founded on the Bible-believing faith of the Pilgrim Fathers and the Puritans. Their life on this new land was extremely difficult in the early years. But they believed in the words of God and obeyed them in their lives. For example, they took Matthew 6:33 as God's promise: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." So they built their churches before they put up their own houses. God blessed their faith abundantly and blessed this country. Now, however, many people follow the trend of the world instead of the word of God. Let us pray that people of this nation may get back to the Bible once again so that we may be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

II. LIVING ACCORDING TO GOD'S WORD (9-13)

The Pharisees were proud of keeping all the traditions of the elders. But their hearts were not right before God. They cared more about how they appeared to men than to God. The result was that they became quite creative in circumventing the word of God. Jesus used an example to point out their problem. Look at verse 10. *For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother," and "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death."* This is the fifth commandment of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:12). The Jewish society was a family-centered community. Parents took care of their children until they grew up. Children in turn took care of their parents when they were old. And this was based on God's holy command. But some religious leaders apparently circumvented this command by invoking a man-made tradition called "Corban." Look at verses 11-13. *"But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."*

Originally the term "Corban" was used to designate financial assets to be used for the temple. The temple treasury was Corban, meaning that it could not be used for secular purpose such as building a bridge or an aqueduct for water supply. But the Jews turned this into a clever scheme to avoid their responsibility of taking care of their parents. They would tell their parents, "Mom and Dad, I know you need a help with your medical bills.

But my hands are tied. All my bank accounts are Corban.” It was like donating all your assets to a church on the condition that you will enjoy them until you die, so that you don’t have to use them for your parents.

Nullifying the word of God by human tradition is a serious matter. Why? The word of God is the only absolute truth for us. God’s word can help us to keep our hearts pure. Psalm 119:9 says: “How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word.” The psalmist continues in the next two verses: “I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Ps 119:10-11). Some students might consider Bible study as additional burden to their heavy school work. But neglecting the word of God is detrimental to a person’s spiritual life. 1 Peter 1:23 says, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” When Jesus fed the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, people liked Jesus very much. But when Jesus talked about the spiritual bread of life (Jn 6:35), they began to run away one by one until only the disciples were left. Jesus asked, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:67-69). Living a life without God’s word is like trying to grow a plant without water. Those who abide in the word of God are like a tree planted by streams of water (Ps 1:3,4). Most importantly, the word of God is God himself. In the beginning was the Word (Jn 1:1). This is the reason why Jesus spent so much time teaching the word of God wherever and whenever he had opportunity. This is the reason why Jesus rebuked the religious leaders for abandoning God’s word for their traditions.

III. CLEAN HEARTS MORE THAN CLEAN FOOD (14-23)

During the Old Testament period, God taught his people the concept of ‘clean’ and ‘unclean.’ They were to be clean in their hearts because they were chosen to be his holy children. God wanted them to eat, speak, and act as a holy people. God wanted them to overcome their slave mentality and become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But in Jesus’ time, the religious leaders were only concerned with ceremonial cleanliness. If one performed a hand-washing ceremony he was considered clean. Jesus told them that it is not a ceremonial problem, but a heart problem. Look at verses 14-15. *Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, every one, and understand this. 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.’”*

After Jesus left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. They probably felt sheepish about not washing their hands because they were so hungry. Look at verses 18-19. *Jesus asked them, “Are you so dull? Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean.’)* Jesus explained how the Pharisees’ hearts were not right with God. Their hearts were corrupted and they had no love of God in their hearts. They made

use of the suffering people and they were destroying the work of God which was being carried out by Jesus. By focusing on the outward appearance of things, the religious leaders were leading the people in the wrong directions. When we eat unclean food, we may get a stomachache but the bad food eventually comes out of our body. It is not so serious compared to evil thoughts in our hearts.

Look at verses 20-23. *He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"*

God created man in his own image (Ge 1:26). Man was so innocent and pure in heart. But since the Fall of man, his heart was corrupted by sinful thoughts. "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." (Ge 6:5) Man's heart became a source of many evil things. The Lord was grieved and his heart was filled with pain. But in his mercy, God did not abandon man. He sent his one and only Son Jesus to save the sinful humanity. He opened the way for our hearts to be purified: the blood of Jesus Christ can wash away all our sins and make us new persons. We cannot wash our dirty hearts with cleaning solutions; Mr. Clean cannot make us clean inside. Only the blood of Jesus can make us clean before God's eyes. This is a promise we find 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

We have a tendency to be habitual. It is comfortable for us to maintain status quo. So many people today follow traditions and worldly trend like dead fish flowing down the stream. But we learn today that God's people must live according to the word of God. We must fill our hearts with the word of truth so that we may love God with all our hearts and serve him from our hearts.