

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 5, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
WHEN TRADITION GETS IN THE WAY
Mark 7:1-23**

As we continue our travels with Jesus, our Scripture reading today tells of some Pharisees, who were known for their rigorous devotion to the most minute details of the law of Moses and all the traditions that had grown up around the law, and some other Jewish religious leaders who traveled from Jerusalem to Galilee to meet with Jesus.

I invite you to turn in the Bible to Mark 7:1-23. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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Do you know the story of the pastor who had an encounter with a mugger? The pastor had gone to visit a member of his church who was a patient in an inner-city hospital. This was back in pre-COVID days, when you could make hospital calls. Even though he was not a Catholic priest, the pastor wore a clerical collar because he knew it would give him instant recognition as a member of the clergy, and that status sometimes opens doors in a hospital that might otherwise be closed.

After seeing the patient from his church, the pastor was walking down a corridor when an excited young man, seeing his collar, ran toward him and shouted: "Father! Father! Great news! My wife just gave birth to a baby boy! I'm a father! Can you believe it?! Here, have a cigar."

The pastor congratulated the new father, wished him God's blessings, and, although he didn't smoke, graciously took the cigar and put it in the inside pocket of his jacket. Then he continued on his way as the new dad ran off down the corridor, celebrating the miracle of a new life.

When he got outside the hospital, the pastor was confronted by a mugger who demanded all his money. It was a cold day, and the pastor was wearing an overcoat. Choosing not to risk his life, he reached inside his coat to get his wallet. As he did so, the mugger saw his clerical collar for the first time and immediately said: "O, forgive me, Father. I didn't realize you were a priest. I can't take your money. "

The pastor tried to redeem the situation by extending grace and then urged the man to live an honest and upright life. As a parting gesture, he pulled the cigar out of his pocket and offered it to the mugger. But the mugger refused it. "No, thank you, Father," he said. "I couldn't. I've given up smoking for Lent."

This man was religious enough to give up smoking for Lent, and apparently he was serious about it. But that hadn't stopped him from violating (or attempting to violate) the eighth commandment (Exodus 20:15), which prohibits stealing.

I first heard this story from another pastor, who said it was a true story. I'm not sure I believe it. Whether it actually happened or not, it illustrates one of the points Jesus was making in this encounter he had with these religious authorities who had come out from Jerusalem on what was not so much a fact-finding mission as a fault-finding mission. They weren't looking for insight or understanding about Jesus. They were looking for things they could use against Him.

In this Scripture passage, Jesus zeroes in on two issues that are still with us today, two matters as important and relevant in our lives as they were 2,000 years ago:

1. The proper place of tradition in the life of a Christian; and
2. The question of what defiles or pollutes the soul.

TRADITION

We will only have time today to consider the first. So, what about tradition? The New Testament word for "tradition" is the Greek word *paradosis*. Literally, it means "what is handed down" from one generation to another.

Everybody has traditions of some kind. When I was growing up, it was a tradition in our family to have popcorn every Sunday evening. This tradition had been handed down from my Mom's family, who had popcorn for supper every Sunday evening on the family farm in Ohio. When my Mom lived with us, she still made popcorn practically every Sunday. My brothers and I still have popcorn most Sunday evenings. I plan to have some tonight.

Fireworks on the 4th of July is one of our traditions as Americans, as is honoring the memory and sacrifice of men and women who have given "the last full measure of devotion" in service to our country every year on Memorial Day.

Like Tevye, who sang about tradition in *Fiddler on the Roof*, we have traditions that help to shape and govern our attitudes and practices regarding marriage and family life, and, I think, whether we realize it or not, every area of our lives.

Like the mugger who gave up smoking for Lent, we observe certain religious traditions that are intended to draw us closer to God and to deepen our relationship to Him. One of our traditions as a church is to have a candlelight service of worship every year on Christmas Eve. It is a good tradition. Another of our traditions is to celebrate the Lord's Supper (Communion) on the first Sunday of every month, as we will do today. We have a tradition, too, of singing "He Is Able" at the close of our worship service every Sunday.

Tradition *can* occupy a profoundly important place in our lives, functioning as a kind of glue that holds families and churches and communities and nations together. Whether it is

a family tradition or a cultural tradition, a national tradition or a religious tradition, we have all been influenced and shaped to one degree or another by what has been handed down to us.

Which can be good, if the traditions we observe honor God and serve His purposes. It can be good, as long as the traditions handed down to us do not become an end in themselves and deflect us from faithfulness to the Word and will of God. It can be good, as long as we don't elevate our traditions or personal preferences to the place where they take precedence over God's commands and instructions to us.

Which was precisely the problem with the Pharisees, wasn't it? In His dialogue with them, as they criticized the disciples for eating without properly washing their hands, Jesus said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions" (Mark 7:9).

It was said of one of our former Presidents (not necessarily the first one who comes to mind) that he was a man of giant virtues and giant flaws. It is probably true of many, or most, of the Presidents in our nation's history. It was also true of the Pharisees, who were fully devoted defenders of and evangelists for the tradition that had been handed down from one generation to the next by the rabbis. But they also had some devastating spiritual blind spots. Wittingly or not, they had elevated their traditions to such a height that the traditions actually got in the way of a real, personal relationship with God.

The tradition was intended to be a guide for the Jewish people in their pursuit of holiness. Make no mistake about it: Holiness matters. In Leviticus 11, the Lord said to His people Israel: "I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore, be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45; cf. 11:44; 19:2). Holiness, for us, involves two things: 1) being set apart for God; and 2) living life in a way that pleases God.

The Pharisees mistakenly thought that legalism – obeying every jot and tittle, dotting every "i" and crossing every "t" of the law and centuries of tradition that had been added, layer after layer, to the law – was the key to holiness. Legalism, they thought, was the way to get in good with God. Legalism was the way to find favor in God's sight. But legalism is a dead end. Always was. Always will be. Legalism will never make you right with God. Legalism is antithetical to grace. The only way to be made right with God is by grace, which is a gift from God that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will, no matter how hard you try.

No matter how hard the Pharisees tried – and nobody tried harder – no matter how devoted they were to the "do's" and "don'ts" of the law and their traditions, there was no way they could ever reach the bar of holiness. Nor can you or I. Which is why we need grace.

The tradition was a kind of commentary on the Law of Moses. It contained rules and regulations to cover pretty much every detail of life. It was intended to help people apply

God's Law in the practical situations of daily life. It was supposed to help people see the boundaries established in the Law, so they could live within those boundaries.

The problem is that, as layer after layer of rules and regulations were added to the Law, the tradition took on a life of its own. It got in the way of God's intended purposes in the Law. It distorted the Law and actually became a way to get around the principles embodied in the Law.

An example of that is the Corban principle Jesus decries in verses 9-13. *Corban* is a good word. (It is a good name, too ☺.) It means "a gift" or "an offering" to God. What the Pharisees did, though, was to turn it into a theological loophole. Do you know the story of the famous comedian, W.C. Fields, who was not known for his reverence for God? Someone "caught" him reading the Bible one day and asked him what he was doing. Fields answered: "Just looking for loopholes." The Pharisees turned the Corban principle into a loophole that excused them from honoring and caring for their aging parents.

Here is how it worked: The fifth commandment says: "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16). This is a commandment you never outgrow, no matter how old you or your parents become. You don't reach a certain age where this commandment no longer applies. But the rabbis came up with this principle by which a person could pledge money to the temple – God's house – to be paid upon the person's death that otherwise could have been used to support one's parents. In the meantime, the individual(s) could still use the money for themselves while they were still alive. But it allowed them to selfishly shirk any responsibility to care for and provide for the needs of their parents. It was a form of religiously-sanctioned selfishness.

Jesus, of course, saw right through it. He called it as He saw it. He told the Pharisees they were playing fast and loose with God's commands. They were using their rules – their tradition – to overrule God's Word.

Their great virtue was their zealous devotion to a life of obedience to all the rules and regulations of the Law and traditions. Their goal was to teach others, by precept and practice, how to be holy. Jesus had no argument with their goal.

But He exposed their giant flaw, which was simply to sideline the real purpose and spirit of God's Word in their obsessive and mechanical commitment to man-made traditions.

Like good Presbyterians, the Pharisees did everything "decently and in order", which Paul commends in 1 Corinthians 14:40. There is no problem with that. But if you major in minors, as the Pharisees did, if you focus on rules and regulations and traditions instead of what is in your heart, if you fail to keep the main thing the main thing, you will lose sight of the main thing as a result.

What is the main thing? It is not the traditions, as valuable as traditions may be. It is not the religious drive to live by a list of "do's" and "don'ts". The main thing is Jesus Himself: to know Him as Savior and Lord, to trust in Him, to love Him, to serve Him, to

follow Him, and to be a winsome witness to Him in both your words and ways. In churchy terms, the main thing is not what kind of music we have in worship, or how we celebrate Communion, or what (if anything) we might give up for Lent. The main thing, in the words of the Westminster Catechism, is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. That is the chief end of man. The main thing is to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30-31). The main thing is to love one another, as Jesus has first loved us (John 13:34); to be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Jesus loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1-2). As it says in *The Message*: “Observe how Christ loved us: His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn’t love in order to get something from us but to give everything of Himself to us. Love like that” (Ephesians 5:2, *MSG*).

The Pharisees reduced the God-honoring life to an almost endless series of external actions. They complained to Jesus about eating without washing hands. It’s true that washing your hands before you eat – washing your hands often and thoroughly – is a good idea. I can say with confidence that Jesus is not against it; He is absolutely for it, COVID or no COVID. But there is something more important to Jesus than clean hands. He is more concerned with clean hearts. The Pharisees were preoccupied with ritual and the way things look on the outside. What mattered to Jesus – what *matters* to Jesus – is the inside ... and the meaning of the rituals or traditions we choose to follow.

The traditions of the Pharisees got in the way of their relationship with God. Don’t be like them. Don’t let that happen to you. Don’t let your personal preferences for worship or church activities get in the way of your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ or with your sisters and brothers in Christ. Don’t allow yourself to become a prisoner to any tradition that, when it takes on too much importance, will get in the way of your spiritual growth in Christ and heart-obedience to Him.

I hope it is intuitively obvious to you that our greatest need – the greatest need of humankind – is not cleaner hands. Better personal hygiene is not our greatest need. Our greatest need is for changed hearts.

I will end with this. More than 150 years ago, J.C. Ryle wrote in his commentary on Matthew: “What is the first thing we need to be Christians? A new heart. What is the sacrifice God asks us to bring to Him? A broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). What is the true circumcision? The circumcision of the heart (Romans 2:29). What is genuine obedience? To obey from the heart. What is saving faith? To believe with the heart. Where ought Christ to dwell? In our hearts through faith (Ephesians 3:17)” (Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospel of Matthew*, 126).

Your heart matters to God. Only God can change our hearts and make us right with Him. No obsession with obedience to laws and traditions can do that. Only God. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Corinthians 15:57).

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.