

“Like Putting Lipstick on a Pig”
The Gospel According to Mark 7:1-13

April 8th, 2018

I love the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. In the buildup to the song “Tradition,” Tevye, a poor Jewish milkman living in the Ukrainian village of Anatevka, explains the role of tradition for Jews in Imperial Russia in 1905:

“Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka, we have traditions for everything. How to sleep. How to eat. How to work. How to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered, and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, ‘How did this tradition get started?’ I'll tell you. I don't know. But it's a tradition. TRADITION! TRADITION!”

Tradition is what our Lord Jesus encountered in the passage of sacred Scripture before us this morning (**Mark 7:1-13**). But, the problem of tradition is not just a first century Jewish problem with which Jesus dealt. It is a problem that each of us must deal with: in our church and within our own hearts.

The Gospel According to Mark 7:1-13:

“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?”

⁶ 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.”

Traditions aren’t always bad; some traditions are quite good. During the more than 8 years Jan, Zach, Molly and I lived in Alabama, we were introduced to many Southern traditions – sweet tea, peanuts in Coke, hot boiled peanuts, observing ladies taking flowers to decorate graves of deceased Confederate soldiers on what they call Decoration Day (what Northerners call ‘Memorial Day’). Now, I enjoy eating black eyed peas, but one tradition that reportedly brings good luck is having black eyed peas with boiled okra on New Year’s Day. (Boiled okra is the Harvard beet of the South!)

But, when the traditions of man conflict with the commandments of God, tradition must always take a back seat. Today's passage "contains a humbling picture of what human nature is capable of doing in religion." (Ryle, 134) Traditions start out as good things; but, unless we are very careful, traditions can begin to trump God's Word rather quickly and subtly.

Tradition, as the Jews saw it in Jesus' day, protected God's Word and assisted the people in keeping it. Tradition was known to be a "fence around the law." But as time passed, the fencing of the law produced some famous absurdities. For example, in an effort to protect the Sabbath from being broken through inadvertent labor, devout persons were given an amazing list of prohibitions – fences.

For instance, looking in the mirror was forbidden, because if you looked in the mirror on the Sabbath Day and saw a gray hair, you might be tempted to pull it out and thus perform work on the Sabbath. You also could not wear false teeth; if they fell out, you would have to pick them up and you would be working. In regard to carrying a burden, you could not *carry* a handkerchief on the Sabbath, but you could *wear* a handkerchief. That meant if you were upstairs and wanted to take the handkerchief downstairs, you would have to tie it around your neck, walk downstairs, and untie it. Then you could blow your nose downstairs!

Rabbis debated about a man with a wooden leg; if his home caught on fire, *could he carry his wooden leg out of the house on the Sabbath?* One could spit on the Sabbath, but you had to be careful where. If it landed on the dirt and you scuffed it with your sandal, you would be cultivating the soil and thus performing work. (Hughes, 163)

We see in today's text that religious experts from Jerusalem were dispatched to see what Jesus was doing that caused such a response throughout the region. The scribes were the teachers of the Jewish law, and the Pharisees prided themselves on living lives of obedience to the letter of that law. They did not like Jesus, nor did they trust His message. They saw Him as a Revolutionary causing a great deal of trouble for the religious order of the day.

Verse 2 says these "faith inspectors" observed that some of Jesus' disciples didn't wash their hands before they ate bread. Now, on the surface, we might agree that was a bad thing. After all, to wash one's hands before eating is a sound way to fight off disease; it's good hygiene! Conversely, to eat with unclean hands is poor health prevention (and it's also bad manners)!

But, this washing was a symbolic practice for the Jewish people, not meal consumption. Maintaining the symbolic practice of rinsing one's hands before eating was understood to bring cleansing from close contact with Gentiles. It was a way of keeping oneself unpolluted from the Gentile "dogs" around them. These Jewish religious authorities saw Gentiles as a class of people below them, along the lines of the servants in old Europe who lived in the castle basements, and the rich families who lived on the main floors at ground level and above.

Such washings not only indicated a wrong attitude toward people, but they also conveyed a wrong idea of the nature of sin and personal holiness. The pious Pharisees thought they were holy because they obeyed the Law and avoided external defilement. Jesus says here that a person who obeys the Law externally can still break the Law in his heart.

The Critics had a Critique of Jesus and His disciples. It's in verse 5 – we can picture the snooty way they may have posed such a question to Jesus, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?” Jesus took the opportunity to point out the hypocrisy of these so-called religious experts.

The **Response of the Redeemer** begins in verse 6 and carries through verse 7. He begins by quoting Scripture from the Old Testament (the Bible available at that time). Jesus refers to **Isaiah 29:13** when He said: “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.’”

Jesus exposes three elements in the lives of these Pharisees:

1 – **They were hypocrites.** A hypocrite is an actor. In the ancient world, actors did not wear make up to disguise themselves for their part. Instead, they wore masks. The real personality of the actor was hidden behind the mask. The scribes and Pharisees said one thing; they're hearts spoke something altogether different. It's like putting lipstick on a pig; it's still a pig! In terms of spirituality, the mask is the exterior of a person. We may outwardly do all the right things. Our external Christianity may include all the spiritual disciplines we regularly say we do – praying, reading and memorizing the Bible, serving the Church, teaching others God's Word, showing up for every service and event. But, inwardly, our true self lies. *Do these external practices coincide with our interior hearts? Dear one – am I describing you?*

2 – **Their hearts were far from God.** These Pharisees pretended to be near God. But, the truth was, their hearts were far from God. Listen to Bishop Ryle's thoughts from His *Expository Thoughts on the Gospel* – “The heart is the part of man which God chiefly notices in religion. The bowed head and the bended knee – the grave face and the rigid posture – the regular response and the formal amen – all these together do not make up a spiritual worshipper. The eyes of God look further and deeper. He requires the worship of the heart. It must not content us to take our bodies to church, if we leave our hearts at home!” (Ryle, 136) *Friend, where has your mind been during this service? Maybe you've played Monster Hunter or Candy Crush Saga instead of interacting with the Bible on your phone? Have you been planning lunch or what you'd be doing this afternoon?* If your thoughts have been anywhere than on our great God, it could mean your heart is far from God like the hypocrites Jesus confronted.

3 – **They placed tradition above Scripture.** Beginning in verse 8, Jesus charges these religious professionals with “laying aside the commandment of God, and instead (holding) to the tradition of men.” He continues in verse 9, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.” For the Pharisees, holiness was being judged by what could be seen. They had replaced God's love with self-love, and God's law with man's tradition. Appearances were more important to them than actualities. They failed to see that what we are is what we are inside.

Jesus uses a biblical commandment to prove His point. This is verse 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.”

On occasion, people would take a sacred vow to devote something (such as money or possessions) to the Lord. The devoted thing then became ‘Corban,’ meaning, “set apart for God.” Again, on the surface, this is a good and even godly practice. But, this was understood to mean that a person could not use that money to support a father or mother in need – it was tied up in some sort of trust. These men Jesus confronted claimed to love God, but they had no love for their parents! Using such money or possessions for one’s parents is a way of fulfilling the Fifth Commandment! In using such gifts to help those in need they are being devoted to God!

Practically, the Word of God was nothing and the traditions of man were everything! “Obedience to the traditions constituted true religion. Obedience to the Scriptures was lost sight of altogether.” (Ryle, 138)

Tradition has a way of creeping up again and again throughout the history of the church. It was primarily the tradition of the church that Martin Luther reacted against during the Protestant Reformation. His writings infuriated the Pope and much of Christendom. At the Diet of Worms in April 1521, Luther was called upon to recant (take back) his writings against the traditions of the church. When asked if the writings beside him were his, he said they were. Then Dr. Luther was asked to deny what was taught in those books, to which he responded:

Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.

Dear ones, holiness is not a matter of externals, but of the heart. We must stop pretending that we are godly and pure outwardly when we are not inwardly. We must stop withholding forgiveness from others, and begin loving them, especially those with whom we’ve made vows before God – our spouses if we have them, and fellow members of the church. If you have not surrendered control of your life to Jesus, then you must do so this very day, for you could meet God this very day

William Poteet once noted how in 1903 the Russian Czar noticed a sentry posted for no apparent reason on the Kremlin grounds. Upon review, he discovered that in 1776 Catherine the Great found there at that point the first flower of spring. "Post a sentry here," she commanded, "so that no one tramples that flower under foot!" Some traditions die hard. But the Word of God stands forever!