

TRADITION: THE GOOD AND THE BAD

Mark 7:1-13

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

August 25, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 7, verses 1 through 13. In this gospel lesson, Jesus scrutinizes his opponents for their trusting their vain traditions instead of trusting in the grace of God. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 7, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ² they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) 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.”

⁹ And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' ¹¹ But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban" ' (that is, given to God)— ¹² then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Tradition. Whenever I hear that word, I can't help but think of the opening song from *Fiddler on the Roof*. I hear that word, "Tradition," sung over and over in my head. And Tevye, the main character, compares his community of Jews living in Imperial Russia to a Fiddler on a roof, trying to scratch out a beautiful tune without breaking his neck. And he asks, "How do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word: Tradition!" The musical illustrates the rich history of the Jewish people, how their tradition preserved their identity through difficult times, and how it also frustrated them at other times. Their traditions had changed some since the time of Jesus,

but remarkably little compared to the rest of the world. There were some good things about their traditions, and, perhaps, also some bad.

Now let's go back about two thousand years to the time of Jesus. In this gospel lesson, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees and the way their traditions had become an idol to them.

Traditions are good, or, at least, they can be. A lot of it depends on whether or not a tradition is used rightly. This passage speaks of how the Pharisees had a tradition that they would always wash their hands before they eat. Now that doesn't sound so bad. We have the same tradition in our house. We usually hold our children to it, unless I'm really hungry, in which case I just want them to come to the table so we can quickly pray and eat. The Pharisees also had traditions about washing cups, pots, vessels, and couches. Now, all of that sounds fine, even good. So what's the problem?

There's that old saying, "Cleanliness is next to godliness." I don't know where it came from, but it's wrong. Cleanliness is nowhere near godliness. Cleaning yourself up to look good does not even begin to make one godly. Nor is it godly-adjacent. But godliness, true godliness comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Cleanliness has nothing to do with it.

All of the Pharisees' washing really had nothing to do with health. Germs are why we make our kids wash. But for the Pharisees, it was about religious cleanliness. And it was especially about maintaining a barrier between them and the gentiles. A gentile was anyone from a different nation. That's all it really means. The word "gentile" really just means "nation." A gentile was someone from another nation. And the Jews maintained a sharp distinction between themselves and the nations. If they or any of their vessels came into contact with a gentile, and it was always possible, the Pharisees would wash, not for health reasons, but for religious cleanliness. They didn't want to get any gentile on them. It would be kind of like if you meet someone for lunch. You show up and shake hands. And the person immediately says, "I have to go wash my hands now." That would be a little bit insulting. The difference, though, is that a Pharisee never would have eaten lunch with a gentile in the first place.

I suppose it would be helpful now to pause and define what a Pharisee was. The Pharisees were one of two main religious parties in Israel during the time of Jesus. The other group was called the Sadducees. Jesus had run-ins with both of them, but he had more in common with the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the party that took the Old Testament Scriptures more seriously. The Sadducees felt more that as long as they just kept the sacrifices going and observed the other rituals prescribed by God, then they were good. The Pharisees cared about the sacrifices too, but they also placed a heavy emphasis on personal piety. For them, it wasn't enough that the priest kept the sacrifices. Individuals needed to lead holy and righteous lives. So if we were just comparing the Pharisees and the Sadducees, we would probably say that the Pharisees were the good guys. But these are not the only two options. Sometimes, just because you have two options to pick from, it doesn't mean one is good and one is bad. The Pharisees got some stuff right, but most of them got the big things wrong. They had little room for faith. And by "faith," I don't simply mean an acknowledgement that God exists and is sovereign over the world. They knew that. But faith especially means a trusting dependence on him. True faith trusts that God is kind to us, not because we keep his commandments, but because he sends his Christ to be our Savior.

The error of the Pharisees was to think that if they kept God's commandments, then they would find favor with God, and he would reward them in this life and the next. They acknowledged him, but instead of trusting him to save them, they trusted themselves to be good enough to earn his favor. Their faith was really in themselves. So they misunderstood the

purpose of God's Law. The basic reason why God has given us commandments is simply because they are his will for how we should live. And his will for us is always good, so his commandments are always good for us. Consider the Ten Commandments and how they are good for us. It is good for us to have no other gods, because no other gods can save us. It is good for us to call upon his Name instead of misusing it. It is good for us to remember the Sabbath, so that we can find rest in his Word. It is good for children to honor their parents, so that they can learn from them how to live. It is good for us to not murder, but instead protect human life. It is good for us to not commit adultery, but instead be faithful to our husbands or wives. It is good for us to not steal. It is good for us to tell the truth. It is good for us to be content with the good things God has given to us, instead of coveting the things we don't have. God's commandments are good for us. And I suppose the Pharisees would probably agree with all that, but that wasn't really the primary way they thought about God's Law. They saw it, first and foremost, as a test. It was a test that they could either pass or fail. And if they passed the test, they were righteous and would be rewarded. So they focused their energy on passing the test.

And it means that anywhere God's commandments were not as specific as they wanted them to be, they would fill in the details. For example, regarding the Sabbath command, God basically just said, "Do not work" (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14). This frustrated them, because then they felt like they needed to define what, exactly, counted as work. So they made long lists of what a Jew could or could not do on the Sabbath. And regarding food, God gave a list of clean and unclean animals. They were not to eat any unclean animals (Lev. 11). But the Pharisees wanted to make sure that they didn't accidentally consume anything unclean. Maybe they brushed beside some gentile in the marketplace who had been handling pork. So they insisted on washing hands before they eat. They developed these traditions that they held up beside God's Law. They were man-made commandments, but they treated them as doctrines of God (7:7). Is there anything wrong with washing your hands before dinner? Of course not. But the moment you insist that a person must do it to be acceptable to God, it becomes idolatrous and sinful.

Sometimes their traditions even violated God's commandments. Perhaps the worst example of this was part of the tradition surrounding Corban. This is the one that Jesus brings up in this text. Corban was the fulfillment of a vow. A person could make a vow that money or goods are devoted to God. And once they were devoted to God, they could not be used for anything else, even taking care of their parents. But they didn't have strict rules on when the money or goods were to be handed over to the temple. So a man might claim "Corban," and sound like a very generous man, but he's really just using his vow as an excuse to not honor his father and mother as God had commanded. So Jesus criticized the Pharisees for actually elevating their tradition over the command of God.

The problem isn't really traditions in general. Some traditions are good. Others may be bad. But even with good traditions, we might use them in a bad way. I'm sure it doesn't surprise you to hear me say that some traditions are good. We are, after all, a "traditional" church. We have many traditions, and I think they are good. Really, every church has traditions, even those that call themselves "contemporary" or "non-traditional." You can reject certain traditions, but then you inevitably replace them with something else. Some traditions are just necessary in order to function. Like here, it is our tradition to meet at 10 o'clock on Sunday mornings. Every church has a tradition of when they meet, and it doesn't really matter when it is. It's just good order.

Everyone has traditions. It's unavoidable. Schools have traditions. Workplaces develop traditions. Sporting events are very traditional. Individuals have traditions. And families have

traditions. If we're going to have them, we should make them good. In our house, we have a tradition of reading a Bible story, singing a hymn, and praying before our children go to bed. And we use the same prayers every night, so it really doesn't take any planning or thought. We read a Bible story. The next night we read the next one. We sing a hymn. The next night we sing the next one. Then we pray Martin Luther's evening prayer from the Small Catechism and the Lord's Prayer. It takes very little planning or skill, but the tradition teaches our children the Bible, and it teaches them Christian doctrine through hymns. I say this, I hope, not to boast, but to encourage you all to do the same. Even if you live alone, read the Bible, sing a hymn, and pray. Make it a tradition.

Whenever you develop a way of doing things, that becomes your tradition. Some traditions are intentional, and some are unintentional. Every church develops a pattern for worship. Even if you try to not be traditional, whatever pattern you develop becomes your tradition. So the important issues end up being, *How did we get our tradition, and what does it teach? Was it passed down from our fathers? Did we invent it? Is it based on Scripture? Is it reverent? Does it teach the Christian faith? Does it call us to repentance?*

We have a lot of traditions. Many of them are prescribed by Scripture in some way, like Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the reading of Scripture, preaching, and singing, the Lord's Prayer, confessing our sins, and confessing our faith. These are all things that God has prescribed for us. Some of these things must take place in a worship service, or it's just not Christian worship. Others, he has simply commanded us to do them, and a worship service just happens to be a really good place for them.

For some things, the Bible doesn't prescribe the exact words. But wise people before us developed these traditions. They wrote the words of the creeds. Others developed our confession of sin. There are a few reasons why we use the same words over and over again. First of all, because they're good. If we tried to make it up new every Sunday, we just wouldn't do as good of a job. Second, we learn through repetition.

For example, consider our opening prayer. We use the same opening prayer almost every Sunday, and it's not for laziness. Besides being a request for God's blessing on our worship, it also teaches us what we should expect to receive from him. Whenever we hear it, it should orient our hearts to remember that we have assembled to hear God's Holy Word. And we should expect God's Holy Spirit to open our hearts so that we would be taught to repent of our sins, believe in Jesus, and grow in grace and holiness.

And we usually use either the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds as confessions of faith in worship. Both of these are short summaries of Christian doctrine. During many worship services, we might focus on one particular teaching of Scripture, but these creeds help us remember the big picture.

And we use the same confession of sin every Sunday. We don't have to use these words, and I've thought of introducing a different version to use for a little while, but the repetition helps us learn it well. I know that memorization can enable us to just recite it mindlessly. That's one of the dangers. But it doesn't have to be that way. Use the familiarity of it to focus on it more. Meditate on it. Memorization also enables children who cannot read yet to also participate. Our confession of sin reminds us, every Sunday, that there are two aspects of sin. First, our nature. We are by nature sinful and unclean. Second, that we sin against God in thought, word, and deed. Confessing both of these reminds us that, before we even commit sins, we need God's help. And we can't just clean ourselves up by quitting sin. We're not capable of it. So we need God's forgiveness, both for who we are and for what we do.

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And, of course, if it is our tradition to confess our sins, it must also be our tradition to proclaim God's forgiveness. Because he has promised that, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

These are all good traditions. We've put some thought into them. Our fathers in the faith put a lot of thought into them. And the great value of these traditions is that they ultimately bring God's forgiveness to us. But even good traditions can be used wrongly. Biblical traditions like the confession of sin, Baptism, or the Lord's Supper can be used wrongly. One way is if we think of them as a sort of hocus pocus magic work. You might think that if you just come to church and say these certain words, then you're good with God, and you have nothing to worry about. But your heart's not in it. It's like the Lord said through Isaiah, "This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me" (Is. 29:13). You might not even believe in God, but you think, "Just in case, I'll have my bases covered." Ironically, it's kind of like the Pharisees' traditions. We might think that the performance of the ritual is what makes us good with God, but it doesn't. We would be even worse than the Pharisees, because they actually made their rituals difficult. Ours are cheap and easy, that is, if we think of them as mere rituals.

If our hearts are not in it, then it's just an empty ritual, at least to us. But I'm not saying that we make them effective by putting our hearts into it. We might not even be able to do that. It's really just a matter of recognizing that God makes these traditions effective. I mean, this is what we pray for at the beginning of worship: that the Holy Spirit would open our hearts to hear his Word. In the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Jesus comes and joins himself to us. He brings the forgiveness he earned at the cross. When we confess our sins, God forgives us for the sake of Jesus' blood. It's not because we make a really good confession, but because Jesus made a really good sacrifice on our behalf.

We have traditions. It's inevitable. It's impossible to not develop traditions. So we might as well put some thought into it and make our traditions good. But do not think that your observance of traditions makes you favorable to God. Do not think that your observance makes you more favorable than someone with weak traditions. You have found favor with God because Jesus shed his blood for you on the cross. He died for your sins. And he rose again from the dead. His sacrifice makes you favorable to God. And the best thing a tradition can do is teach us to trust in that. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.