

"Twisted Tradition" - Mark 7:1-23

Before we get to the Gospel of Mark this morning, I want to remind you of a critically important doctrinal precept. It is perfectly summarized in a verse I quote often, found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.
(Ephesians 2:8-9)

It is so important that you understand that. You are saved by the grace of God alone - unmerited favor. You didn't earn your salvation. You cannot earn your salvation. But you apprehend your salvation through faith, faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, believing Jesus died to pay the penalty for your cosmic rebellion. And even your faith is a gift granted by a gracious God.

Your salvation is not of works, not of anything you do, not of anything you can do. You believe in Jesus, so you confess Him as Lord. You say to Jesus, "I want you to run my life from now on. I give up any claim I thought I had. You are my Lord and my God." Implicit in that confession is the heartfelt believe that, though Jesus died on the cross for my sins, He was raised from the dead. Because of that, you can have a living relationship with Him.

God's grace alone, operating through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. But how often do we try to add some other requirement to the precious gospel of Jesus Christ? It's been going on for two thousand years and it will continue until Jesus returns. But you do not have to participate in it.

We are, by nature, religious folks. Human beings are hard-wired to worship someone or something. If you don't worship the Almighty God who created this universe, you will find a cheap substitute, an idol of some sort. Your idol might even be yourself.

Most religion is all about doing stuff to approve yourself to whatever god you are worshipping. Born-again Christians are not immune from this. Even when we understand that we are saved by faith alone, we try to add requirements to the simplicity of the Gospel. Well, here's the deal: you cannot improve on perfect. If you add anything to the gospel of Jesus Christ, you subtract from it.

Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? (Galatians 3:3)

That would be impossible!

But we all have our religious traditions. That isn't bad in itself, but any tradition that modifies the simplicity of the gospel is a twisted tradition. Jesus will address this in our passage this morning.

At this point of His earthly ministry, He has crested the apex of His popularity. He is still about a year away from the cross, and He will never be more popular. In fact, as we read in John, Jesus seems to be doing things calculated to drive people away. Now, for the next year, His primary teaching focus will be toward the Apostles themselves. Oh, He'll still minister to others, but He is focused on preparing the 12 for what will be required of them.

Although His popularity is beginning to wane, the religious elite still see Jesus as a serious threat to the *status quo*. They are out to get Him and that's what we see as Chapter 7 opens.

Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. (Mark 7:1)

At this point, Jesus is still in the region of Galilee. So, it is somewhat remarkable that Pharisees and scribes would travel so far to confront Him. Clearly, they were threatened by Him, and they were there with the express purpose of finding something they could accuse Him with. It didn't take them long!

Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. 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. 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. 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?" (Mark 7:2-5)

I want to make sure you understand what's going on here. The disciples were not being accused of eating with filthy hands. They were not engaged in unsanitary behavior. The accusation was that they didn't adhere to the tradition of the elders. Specifically, they didn't wash in the prescribed way. This had nothing to do with violating any Levitical Law. Mark makes sure we understand this in verses 3 and 4. They were not violating scripture, they were violating the tradition of the elders ... the traditions of men.

At the time of Jesus, this was an oral tradition. They had all sorts of rules and regulations that were given to make sure people didn't violate the Law given through Moses. It was like they built a fence around the Law so that nobody could get close to it. So, they had all sorts of rituals, rules, ceremonies, prohibitions, precepts and behaviors they thought protected people from even getting close to violating the Law. And let me tell you, there were a bunch of them. It's why they needed the Lawyers.

About 200 years after the time of Christ, all of these oral traditions were compiled, organized and written down. It is a document called the **Mishnah**, which contains the total accumulated content of Jewish religious tradition. I don't have time to get too far into it, but the regulations in the Mishnah regarding the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches that Mark mentions ... those regulations require thirty chapters. Thirty chapters! Really?

It wasn't at all about sanitation. It wasn't at all about the Law of God. They were heaping foolish requirements on top of the perfect word of God. They weren't the first to do this. We even see this phenomenon before the fall of man. Remember what God told Adam?

... but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:17)

But by the time it got around to Eve's conversation with the serpent, she said this:

*... but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, **nor shall you touch it**, lest you die.' " (Genesis 3:3)*

Now I don't know if it was Adam who added the requirement of not touching the fruit, or if it was Eve who wanted to make sure she didn't get close enough to be tempted. In any case, there is the first example of humans trying to artificially add to God's requirements.

So, the Pharisees and the scribes accuse Jesus of not requiring His disciples to wash their hands in a certain way. Let's see how Jesus responds.

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. AND IN VAIN THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE COMMANDMENTS OF MEN.' 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." (Mark 7:6-8)

Well, that was direct! He called the hypocrites And He quoted scripture ... Isaiah, specifically. The indictment is that they are outwardly religious, but inwardly corrupt. Their hearts were far from God. Why? Because they were teaching the commandments of men as if they were the doctrine of God. Essentially, they were putting words in God's mouth. How presumptuous can you get?

But the same thing happens today. All sorts of latter-day prophets justify their actions by saying "The Lord told me to ..." then you can fill in the blank. They claim to be speaking for God, to be speaking for Jesus. Maybe they had a dream or a vision. Maybe they think they are somehow channeling the Lord Himself.

Well, we need to put people like that to the test. We need to be like the Bereans. We need to search the scriptures to see if their testimony is true. And listen, your dream, your vision is worthless to me unless it conforms to the clear teaching of the Holy Word of God! This is God's primary means of communicating with us. We need to search the scriptures to see if every teaching is true.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1)

Jesus continues His indictment with an example from their oral tradition.

He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER'; and, 'HE WHO CURSES FATHER OR MOTHER, LET HIM BE PUT TO DEATH.' 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), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do." (Mark 7:9-13)

God's law requires that we honor our fathers and mothers. It's in the Ten Commandments. Part of that responsibility is making sure our parents are taken care of as the get older. That's not the government's job, folks! It's your job, by God's design. But according to the Jewish tradition, you could declare any amount of money you have, any of your possessions as Corban, or, a gift to God. But it was a deferred gift. It was pledged, but not given. In the meantime, you had full use of the money or the property and you could spend it on anything you wanted. It's sort of like what we call an estate gift today. You pledge it, but it isn't actually given until you die.

And so, if mom or dad develops a need, you simply say, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I can't help you out because everything I have is Corban. Remember, you still have use of the funds. You can spend the money anyway you want. But by this declaration, you avoid honoring your father and mother.

Well did Jesus say “you hypocrites”!

Jesus used this confrontation as a teaching moment.

When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear Me, everyone, and understand: There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Mark 7:14-16)

Really, folks, it's not the external stuff we have to worry about. It is the depravity we all harbor inside of us. That's what has the power to send us to Hell. We are defiled by our sin nature and we all have a sin nature!

When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. So He said to them, "Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?" And He said, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man." (Mark 7:17-23)

Twisted traditions can get us in trouble in two ways. First, they get us in trouble by adding requirements over and above what God requires. When you confess Jesus as your Lord and believe God has raised Him from the dead, you are saved. You are set free from sin's penalty. You are set free from the external requirements of the Law.

Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. (John 8:36)

Your chains are gone, you've been set free! Why in the world would you want to wrap the chains of your captivity around a life liberated by Jesus? Don't add false burdens to the simplicity of the Gospel.

The second way twisted traditions get us in trouble is that they can give us a false sense of security. Remember how I began this message? I reminded you that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. How many people think that they are going to heaven because they had been baptized as an infant? How many people think that they are going to heaven because they participate in communion once a month, or go to confession, or tithe, or abstain from intoxicants, or go to a worship service a couple times a year? Nothing you do will save you! Salvation is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Jesus provided us with a stern warning.

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' (Matthew 7:21-22)

Jesus is talking about people who are counting on their own good works to gain entrance into Jesus' heaven. They are counting on what they have done. They are counting on their own twisted traditions. What will their fate be?

And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' (Matthew 7:23)

These are folks who did all sorts of spectacular religious stuff, prophesying, casting out demons, performing many wonders, but they never knew Jesus.

Here is another illustration Jesus gives us.

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:10-14)

Do you want to be justified? Do you want to be exalted? Do you want to spend eternity in the new heaven and the new earth where righteousness dwells? Don't rely on your works. Don't rely on the twisted traditions of men. Humble yourself. Bow before the cross of Christ and pray: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"