

The Dangers of Tradition

6 ⁵³When they had crossed over [the lake], they landed at Gennesaret, and moored to the shore. ⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, immediately [the people] recognized him. ⁵⁵They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went—into villages, towns, or the countryside—they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him to let them touch even the edge of his garment. And all who touched him were healed.

7 Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around [Jesus]. ²They had seen that some of his disciples ate their food with ‘unclean,’—that is, ceremonially unwashed—hands. ³(Now the Pharisees, and all the Jews, observing the tradition of the elders, do not eat unless they have first performed a ceremonial hand washing. ⁴And [when they come] from the marketplace, they do not eat until they have first bathed themselves. There are also many other [traditions] that they have received and that they observe, [such as] the [ceremonial] washing of cups and pots and brass kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes ask him, Why do your disciples not observe the tradition of the elders, but eat their food with ‘unclean’ hands? ⁶And he said to them, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written, “This nation honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. ⁷They worship me in vain; teaching [as their] doctrines the precepts of men.” ⁸You let go the commandment of God, and hold tightly to the tradition of men. ⁹Furthermore, he said to them, You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, so that you may keep your tradition. ¹⁰Moses said, “Honor your father and your mother;” and, “Whoever curses his father or mother, let him be put to death.” ¹¹But you say, If a man shall say to his father or his mother, That by which you might have received [financial] assistance from me is Corban, (that is to say, Given [to God]); ¹²you no longer allow him to do anything for his father or his mother; ¹³[thereby] making void the word of God by your tradition, which you have handed down [from past generations]. And you do many similar things. ¹⁴Then he called the crowd to himself once again, and said to them, Listen to me, all of you, and understand. ¹⁵Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him; on the contrary, the things that come out of the man are the things that defile the man. ¹⁶If any man has ears to hear, let him hear. ¹⁷When he had entered the house [and was] away from the crowd, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸He said to them, Are you also so lacking in understanding? Do you not realize that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him; ¹⁹because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and then it passes out of his body? ([In saying this he] made all foods clean.) ²⁰And he said, What comes out of the man, that [is what] defiles the man. ²¹From within [men], out of the heart of men, come forth evil thoughts, [such as] fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, ²²[all types of] greed and malice, deceit, wantonness, envy, slander, arrogance, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within [the man] and defile [him].
(Mk. 6:53-7:23)

Introduction

In the Broadway musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, the character, Tevye, speaking about the Jewish community in a rural Russian village, says,

Every one of us is a fiddler on the roof. A fiddler on the roof. Trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. How do we keep our balance? I can tell you in one word: Tradition!

Because of our traditions we have kept our balance for many, many years. We have traditions for everything: how to sleep, ...how to eat, ...how to work, ...how to wear clothing. How did these traditions get started? I don't know. But it's a tradition!

Tradition! Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof!

Traditions are what kept that little Jewish community together. But as we discover from the passage of Scripture presently before us, tradition can also have a very negative and devastating effect. Tradition can shut you off from the presence of Christ and it can shut out the demands of God upon your life. Let us carefully consider the Dangers of Tradition.

I. Do Not Let Tradition Blind You to the Glory of Christ (Mk. 6:53-7:5)

Mark 6:53-56 describes the scene that occurred upon Jesus' return to Galilee from the far side of the Sea of Galilee. Throngs of people gather unto Jesus wherever He goes, laying before Him their sick and diseased. Jesus responds by ministering to them; displaying His divine power and demonstrating His compassion.

In the midst of this scene chapter seven of Mark introduces us to the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees on the subject of tradition. The Pharisees had observed that some of Jesus' disciples ate their bread without having first washed their hands. According to their tradition, such an act was a religious defilement, and they demanded to know why Jesus tolerated it among His disciples.

As you observe the Pharisees' encounter with Christ occurring in this setting, note that the Pharisees have no sensitivity or spiritual awareness to either the Person of Christ or the work of Christ. They do not offer worship to Christ in response to His display of divine power, nor do they offer thanksgiving to Christ in response to His display of divine compassion. Their pre-occupation with their tradition blinded them to the glory of Christ; they fail to see who He really is and praise Him for what He is doing. Let us not allow tradition to blind us to the glory of Christ; preventing us from adoring His glory and praising Him as the One who alone is worthy to receive our praises and worship.

What is tradition? It is giving a man-made regulation the position and authority reserved for the Word of God alone. By way of example, note Mark 7:8, the washing of hands before eating was elevated by the Pharisees to the level of a divine command. With regard to our Christian activities, we should always ask the questions: “Why do we do this particular thing? Why do we do it in the way we do?” When we subject a particular activity to the above questions and find that the answer is anything other than, “We do this particular activity and do it in this particular way because the Word of God expressly instructs us to do so,” we have identified a tradition (be it good or bad.) Once we have identified a tradition, we need to subject it to the further question, “Is this particular tradition promoting or hindering the glory of Christ and our effectiveness in serving Christ?” We must never allow any tradition to blind us to the glory of Christ, becoming more important and precious to us than Christ Himself. We must never allow any tradition to prevent us from effectively serving Christ and thereby bring glory to Him.

II. Do Not Let Tradition Limit You to the Superficial (Mk. 7:1-5,14-23)

The particular tradition that is the subject of discussion in Mark chapter seven is the Jewish custom of washing the hands before eating. This was not done for sanitary purposes by the Pharisees; rather it was done out of religious motivation. The Pharisees washed their hands and even bathed themselves in an effort to prevent their contact with the “unclean” Gentiles and “sinners” from contaminating their food and consequently defiling them in body and soul.

With regard to this particular tradition, note, first, that it was superstitious; it entertained the notion that physical contact can somehow impart spiritual defilement. Secondly, it was also superficial in its understanding of evil. As Jesus points out in Mark 7:14-23, it is not what goes into us that defiles us, but what comes out of us (vs. 15)—we are not defiled by foreign elements; on the contrary, our nature itself is defiled. It is out of the heart that evil proceeds (vs. 21-23)—our moral corruption does not merely reside in the extremities of our being; on the contrary, it originates from the very core of our being. Hence, there is the absolute need for the new birth; the need to become a new creation through personal connection with Christ by faith in Him—*“if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”* (2 Cor. 5:17)—and the impossibility of personal reformation by our own human efforts.

Let us not allow tradition to limit us to the superficial. The characteristic of tradition is to substitute man-made ordinances in the place of the Word of God. The characteristic of man-made ordinances is to confine the scope of the moral law; doing so by limiting the moral law as though it only pertained to actions. This is a misconception addressed by the Lord Jesus in such a passage as Matthew 5:27-28, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”* Our Lord Jesus Christ explains that the moral law

of God addresses our thoughts and motives and the intents of our heart—this was in contrast to the teaching of the scribes, which sought to limit the demands of the moral law to merely the actions of a man.

Another way in which man-made ordinances seek to confine the scope of the moral law is by limiting the demands of the law to the mere observance of “religious duties;” a misconception the Lord Jesus addresses in His parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector: *“The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get’”* (Lk. 18:11-12.) In Jesus’ parable the Pharisee focuses on his “religious duties,” not the moral demands of the law of God; Jesus would sternly rebuke them for doing so, *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and integrity. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former”* (Matt. 23:23.) The whole intention of any and all such man-made ordinances is to seek to limit the scope of the moral law so that a man may seek to achieve his own salvation and justification before God.

III. Do Not Let Tradition Separate You from the Law of God (Mk. 7:6-13)

In response to the Pharisees’ objection that He condones departure from the traditions of the Jews, Jesus charges them with forsaking the moral law of God (vs. 8-9.) In verses 10-13 Jesus gives an example of how the Pharisees allowed tradition to replace—and contradict—the commandment of God.

The law of God instructs us to honor our father and mother. A particular tradition instituted by the elders allowed a man to deny his parents the benefit of his possessions and his financial support if the man declared those possessions to be *“Corban,”* (or, as Mark explains, *“Dedicated [to God.]”*) Note that declaring his possessions to be “Corban” did not deny the man the personal benefit of those possessions, but it did allow him to circumvent his obligation to the law of God, which requires us to honor our parents—part of which is to see that their needs are met. The commentator, E.H. Plumptre, explains the procedure known as “Corban”:

A man who declared his property (whether that be real estate or personal possessions) to be “Corban” (that is to say, “Dedicated to God”) could no longer give that property to any other person, for technically it now belonged to God. However, the actual time when this vow would be fulfilled, (the time when the man actually turned his property over to the temple,) was left to his own discretion. In the meantime, the man had the right to continue using the “dedicated” property for his own personal benefit, although he was forbidden to give it or any of its profits to anyone else, because technically it now belonged to God. (E.H. Plumptre, *The Handy Commentary, Matthew*; C.J. Ellicott, Editor; Cassell & Co. London; p. 212)

Perhaps we could construct a contemporary example of “Corban”: A man might own an orchard. He declares his orchard to be “Corban.” The man’s parents are in financial need. But because their son has declared his orchard to be “Corban,” he cannot sell it and give the proceeds to his needy parents—he cannot even give the profits from the sale of the fruit to his parents, because it now all belongs to God. However, until the time he actually deeds the property over to the temple, he is legally permitted to continue to personally profit from the sale of the fruit and the use of the orchard. Yet another example might be as follows: A son puts money into a bank account designated, “For the LORD.” Now that money can no longer be touched by his parents, but the son himself could still write personal checks for his own benefit, using the money in that special account as a guarantee that his checks would have sufficient funds to back them up.

There is always the temptation to *“leave the commandment of God”* in favor of the tradition of men. Note that Jesus speaks of *“the commandment [singular] of God.”* He is referring to that great commandment, the commandment that which sums up the whole moral law: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment”* (Matt. 22:37-38.) Jesus accuses these people of honoring the LORD with their lips, while in fact their heart was far from Him (vs. 6.) Exalting tradition at the expense of the commandments of God is succumbing to the temptation to govern our life by a man-made code,—which allows us to justify ourselves and serve ourselves,—rather than allow our life to be governed by the demands of God.

Let us not allow tradition to separate us from the law of God. Let us faithfully heed the counsel of the LORD given through the prophet Micah: *“He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does Jehovah require of you? [He requires you] to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”* (Mic. 6:8.)

Conclusion

As Tevye expressed it in *Fiddler on the Roof*, tradition can serve to hold a community together, giving definition and identity to its members: “Because of our traditions everyone know who he is. But the danger of tradition, especially within the church of Jesus Christ, is that it always tends toward shutting out the dynamic presence of Christ and the divine demands of His holy law.

By the grace of God, let us adhere to these three guidelines: 1) Do not let tradition blind you to the glory of Christ; 2) Do not let tradition limit you to the superficial; and 3) Do not let tradition separate you from the law of God.