

“The Traditions of Men”
Mark 7:1-13
(Preached at Trinity, March 16, 2011)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Tonight we begin a new chapter in the Gospel of Mark. As usual there is no chronological point of reference. The last chapter ended with Jesus healing at Gennesaret and now we suddenly find Jesus surrounded by Pharisees.
2. The Pharisees and Scribes came to Jesus hoping to trap Him or discredit Him. The opposition to Jesus is becoming more organized and more heated. They had noticed that the disciples of Jesus failed to go through the ceremonial cleansing prior to eating and they were taking issue with it.
This same account is also found in **Matthew 15** but this account in **Mark 7** contains much greater detail, which is unusual for **Mark**.
3. In **Verse 5** we read of the accusation of the Scribes and Pharisees: Why do the disciples of Christ transgress the tradition of the elders?
Mark 7:5 – “And the Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?"
4. Notice, the disciples were not being accused of breaking the Law of God but the tradition of the elders.
 - A. What were these traditions and where did they come from? The Babylonian captivity and the destruction of the Temple brought terror to the Jews. They finally came to the realization that their calamity had come as the result of their departure from God. The God fearing people among them realized their only hope was to return to God with their whole heart. God's Law must be obeyed so that God's favor might be restored. Men like Ezekiel and Daniel led the way. Soon after their return conditions seemed to favor new applications of the Law. Gradually men arose – the Pharisees and their scribes who developed a multitude of regulations. The list snowballed year by year becoming an enormous list.
 - B. By 200 A.D. these traditions of the elders were recorded in what became the *Mishna*. Later commentaries on the Mishna were produced in what would become the *Talmud*.
 - C. The traditions of the elders became more and more detailed, for example, there were detailed rules with regard to the Sabbath
 1. The ordinary boundary for a Sabbath's journey was 2000 cubits (3000 feet) but if food for two meals was deposited at this border on Friday an additional 2000 cubits might be added.
 2. The carrying of a burden was prohibited on the Sabbath – the lowest standard being the weight of a dried fig. It was permitted to carry a child – and if the child was holding a burden it was permissible. If one's false teeth fell out it was not permitted to lift them.
 3. If it rained and the water that fell from the sky were carried it would be no sin, but if the water first ran down a wall it was sin.

4. To kill any insect on the Sabbath was strictly forbidden.
 5. Water could not be poured on oneself for fear of cleaning the floor.
 6. Women were forbidden to look into a mirror on the Sabbath lest she see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out which would be a grievous sin.
(Men by the way did not use mirrors at all because it was undignified)
5. Although the rules concerning the Sabbath were detailed the rules regarding ceremonial cleansing were even more so. They occupied some 186 pages in the Mishna. Originally only the priests were required to ceremonially wash their hands but by 200 BC all devout Jews were doing it and by the time of Christ the detailed traditions were thoroughly entrenched.
6. The tradition of the elders demanded strict obedience.
Mark 7:3 – “For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, *thus* observing the traditions of the elders;”
- A. The accusation being lifted against the disciples had nothing to do with hygiene. It had nothing to do with the physical dirt. It was concerned entirely of the ceremonial cleansing of the hands.
 - B. They were placing human tradition on the same plane as the Moral Law. Sadly, though, they were substituting true inner purity with the ritual of man-made tradition.
7. The Pharisees were self-righteous – and proud, and critical of all others that didn’t measure up to their tradition.
Mark 7:5 – “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?”
8. Let me set before you some important principles from this passage
- I. First, we must always guard against mere formalism or external religion
Mark 7:6 – “And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me.'”
- A. God is not interested in mere external religion
 1. In **Verse 6** Jesus refers to them as hypocrites. External religion is hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is the sin of which our Lord reserved His harshest condemnation.
Matthew 23:25 – “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.”
 2. A hypocrite is a play actor – a counterfeit
 3. The Pharisees were outward professors only – only lip service
 - B. True worship is our expression of our love for God and thus comes from the heart.
 1. As we’ll see with **Verse 21** Christianity is a matter of the heart
 2. Worship that doesn’t come from the heart is rejected by God.
^{NAS} **Isaiah 29:13** – “Then the Lord said, "Because this people draw near with their words And honor Me with their lip service, But they remove their hearts far from Me, And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned *by rote*,”
^{NAS} **Titus 1:16** – ‘They profess to know God, but by *their* deeds they deny *Him*, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed.’”

3. Religion without holiness is empty vanity
Jesus quotes from Isaiah – “But in vain do they worship Me”
By “vain” He means empty, of no purpose, worthless
4. It is only a form of godliness – a cheap imitation
5. A religious hypocrite is one who performs an outward religion without an inward conversion. He is only dressed up in a Christian costume – But he is not genuine.

II. Second, we must be careful that we do not bind men’s consciences with traditions that the Law of God does not command.

Mark 7:7-8 – “But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’⁸ “Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.”

A. We need to understand, not all tradition is bad

1. There are many things that we do as a church based upon decisions made long ago. We meet on Wednesday nights for corporate prayer. We have Bible study on Sunday mornings and our theological discussion on Sunday nights. Our worship services follow a certain format. None of these things are absolutes but they provide order for our church. Concerning worship Paul wrote:
^{NAS} **1 Corinthians 14:40** – “But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner.”
2. Many issues have been seriously studied and debated in the past and the conclusions have become an important aspect of our practice. Practices become tradition. For example, our men and women separate for prayer on Wednesday nights. We don’t continually open these matters for debate. We have become settled on our tradition – but our tradition is founded upon the solid teachings of Scripture.
3. Again, not all traditions are bad. They are practices that guide the church’s behavior. They bring peace and order. They bring confidence in our practices keeping our consciences pure before God.
^{NAS} **2 Thessalonians 2:15** So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word *of mouth* or by letter from us.
παράδοσις – tradition by instruction, precept,
4. Jesus wasn’t opposed to tradition. He was opposed to tradition that was in conflict with the Law of God or that placed an unnecessary burden upon a man’s conscience.

B. But every tradition must be firmly rooted in Scripture. Traditions that are based upon man-made practices and prejudices but presented as Law must be condemned.

Jesus condemned the Jewish leaders.

Mark 7:6-9 – “And He said to them, “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me.’⁷ ‘But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’⁸ “Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.”⁹ He was also saying to them, “You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep **your** tradition.”

1. In many churches, if you tried to remove the invitation at the close of the service you'd be declared a heretic
2. The SBC demands total abstinence from alcohol in order to serve as a missionary. We must understand that even our practice of using grape juice for the Lord's Supper is a man-made tradition
3. There are churches that sing "Happy Birthdays" as a part of the worship service.
4. There are KJV only churches that place great importance on their tradition of using this translation.
5. New traditions arise every day. As a pastor I'm always cautious about adding something new because it will very quickly become a tradition which will then be difficult to remove.

III. We must be careful that we do not set aside the Law of God for the traditions of men.

Mark 7:7-9 – "But in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." ⁸ "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." ⁹ He was also saying to them, "You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition."

- A. The Scribes and Pharisees were holding to the traditions of men at the expense of the Law of God
1. In my previous point I stressed the danger of adding to the Law of God
 2. Now I'm stressing the danger of diminishing the Law of God. They were guilty of placing human tradition above God's commands.
 3. When Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites we are not to suppose that He was condemning them for a lack of commitment or of being superficial in their commitment
 - a. The Pharisees were very committed to their traditions
 - b. Jesus was condemning them because they placed greater emphasis on the oral tradition than upon the written Law
 - c. In fact, Jesus is condemning the Pharisees for "setting aside" (**V.9**) the Law of God. The word for "setting aside" means to "do away with." The KJV & ESV translates it "reject."
- B. For many today there is a great aversion to the Law of God
1. Antinomianism is rampant today. There is great confusion regarding the Law and the Gospel
 2. There are some within evangelicalism who insist that the OT moral law as found in the Ten Commandments does not apply to NT Christians
 - a. I'm not calling into question their sincerity or their commitment. But they are setting aside the Law of God without warrant
 - b. Listen to Jesus' condemnation in **Verse 9**:
"You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition."
 - c. Notice the word "commandment" in verses 8 & 9. Jesus is referring to the Law of God. As an example He describes their abuse of the Fifth Commandment.
Mark 7:10 "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'

3. The Jews had developed an oral tradition known as Corban
 - a. Under the Law of God they were required to honor their parents. But they had developed a tradition that would allow them to disregard the Law of God.
 - b. If a son had something need by his parents all he had to do is designated it *Corban*. This meant they dedicated it to the Temple making it sacred. He still had full use of it but he could escape his responsibility to care for his parents.
 - c. Jesus condemned the wickedness of their heart and disregard of the Law of God.

Conclusion:

1. At the very heart of this passage is the importance of the Law of God; the Law of God that was expressed as the Ten Commandments written in stone in the Old Covenant and the Law written in our hearts in the New Covenant.
2. At the very heart is the danger of substituting the Law of God with our own inventions—ways we invent to justify our own actions.
3. At the very heart is the danger of worshipping God our way—of shaping God according to our vain imaginations. This is nothing but idolatry.
4. At the very heart of this passage is the importance of living according to the Word of God.

Mark 7:13 – “*thus* invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that.”