

Confessions of a Recovering Traditionalist

Mark 7:1-22

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I am a recovering traditionalist. For decades I set aside the word of God in order to follow the traditions of men. Put another way, I chose to listen to the religious impulse of the flesh rather than to hear and obey the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Now, I was not a cult member. I was an active church-goer within a mainstream evangelical heritage. But what I lacked was the knowledge of the whole purpose of God for I had never exposed my tradition to the objective light of Jesus' teaching. It was only during a life crisis that I began to read Scripture in its own context — and I'm here to tell you, the difference that made cannot be measured! I cannot count the number of times I paused while reading the entirety of a text and thought, "Hey, wait a minute, this isn't what I was told this passage meant!" As I learned to read Scripture within its own context, and prayerfully, I was set free from the shackles of human tradition. But most of all, I learned to hear the voice of my Lord within Scripture — a necessary prerequisite to obedience and spiritual maturation. And I want this for you, too.

The Religious Impulse of the Flesh

It has been my experience that to take Jesus seriously requires one make a clean, permanent break with the fleshly impulse at work within human religious tradition. Now, not all tradition is bad; there is healthy tradition, meaning the apostolic tradition which originates with revelation by the Spirit (see II Thessalonians 2:14; 3:6). What concerns us here is the destructive religious tradition which originates with the spirit of the world and nullifies the word of God, which we will call *traditionalism*.¹ It is traditionalism which the elders of Israel practiced and which Jesus exposed and condemned. And it was traditionalism that later bewitched the new converts in Galatia and prompted Paul's apostolic curse (Galatians 1:6-10; 3:1-3). For just as the Spirit opposes the flesh, and the flesh the Spirit, so also these two forms of tradition oppose each other. So we want to be certain we too are not bewitched by traditionalism. Most American Christians

¹ See Mark L. Strauss, "Mark" in *The Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Clinton E. Arnold, Gen. ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), P. 306.

are in fact so bewitched. The question before us therefore is how do we discern between the apostolic tradition and traditionalism?

Let's begin by reminding ourselves that even though in a fallen condition, humanity nonetheless remains religious. The religious impulse of the flesh however is not virtuous. God is not impressed with religion. The religious impulse creates practices that maintains an appearance of piety but mask a depraved heart (see Romans 1:18-3:21). Let's take Jesus seriously by hearing what he says about traditionalism. Jesus teaches that traditionalism produces two things: hypocrisy and vain worship. Quoting from Isaiah, Jesus says traditionalism allows people whose hearts are far from God to nonetheless honor him with their lips. Traditionalism is deadly because it looks like real religion, it sounds like real religion, when in fact it is vain, worthless, and in the end, only earns the rebuke and just condemnation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, why is it important that you recognize the deadly nature of traditionalism? It is important because most American churches are temples to human religious thought and tradition. To them, Jesus would say as he did in our text, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions" (Mark 7:8). Let me explain. Most Catholic and main-line Protestant theological systems are imports from the traditionalism of the European state-church. And at no time in church history did traditionalism reign as it did in the European state-church from the fourth through the 19th century (and in some places, continues to this day). This is simple historic fact, no matter how their proponents may argue differently. While it is widely understood that the Roman Catholic Church is steeped in traditionalism, most evangelical and Protestant Christians do not realize that their confessions and creeds also represent traditionalism.

For instance, few Presbyterians or Anglicans question the much-revered Westminster Confession of Faith or the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Book of Common Prayer — any more than a practicing Jew would question the Talmud or Mishnah. These documents, whether Jewish or Christian, are not Scripture, but because they guide the adherent to interpret Scripture according to the tradition, they ultimately replace the sole authority of Scripture for many. It is in this sense that traditionalism robs the Christian of the life-giving power of the Spirit through the revealed text, alone. What is worse, many popular Christian leaders in America, like the Jewish elders in our text, peddle religious tradition, though they pretend to be great exponents of the word of God. How do they get away with it? These peddlers get away with it because traditionalism robs

the average Christian of the ability to read and understand the Bible well, which in turn leaves them dull of hearing and not mature enough to discern good from evil. This was the effect of traditionalism upon me.

Most evangelical churches operate out of some form of traditionalism. And inherent within traditionalism is the insidious work of keeping its adherents in the dark of anything but the tradition. So it is, Sunday after Sunday people attend houses of traditionalism. Church leaders attend conference after conference never bothering to question what they hear from the modern “Super-Apostles” of our day. Unsuspecting people dig deep into their pockets to support television and radio programming believing they are getting the Word of God; but what they are getting is traditionalism with just enough biblical text tossed in to maintain credibility. Traditionalism traffics in half-truths, and never “the whole will of God” (see Acts 20:27).

Experts at Nullifying the Commands of God

Let’s return now to our text. In verse 9, Jesus expounds upon his rebuke in verse 8, adding, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commandments of God in order to observe your own traditions!” Jesus goes from simply stating *what* they do in verse 8 to adding *how* they do it in verse 9. “You are experts . . .” begins verse 9 in the NASB. In other words, they skillfully set aside the commands of God in order to observe their traditions. And why do they do this? One simple answer: Greed and power. Traditionalism is a mask for greed and power, and most often at the expense of the poor, the weak, and the elderly.

For instance, Jesus illustrates his charge against these traditionalists by exposing the common practice of diverting resources that might have been used to care for one’s aging parents, as God commands, to instead be “Corban”— a word meaning, “Devoted to God.” That does not mean those funds necessarily went into the temple treasury, but remained instead in the pockets of the religious leaders. If one declared money as “Corban,” that is, devoted to God, one could then piously avoid giving that money to one’s parents, and yet, remain in control of the money. It was even possible to later revoke the vow in order to use those funds. Traditionalism had developed a “fine way of setting aside the commands of God” which ensured financial resources remained in the pockets of those making vows to God only for appearances sake.

Elsewhere Jesus exposes the exploitation of the weak and vulnerable for the sake of monetary gain; such as the common practice of devouring widow’s estates by the scribes (Mark

12:38-40). This reveals the sickening fact that human religious tradition is most often a pretext for power and greed. “This myth of Christ has proved to be most profitable to us,” said Pope Leo X,² who sold indulgences to build St. Peter’s Basilica. By contrast, the word of God reads, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). The Pharisees and teachers of the law were experts in nullifying the word of God by employing traditionalism for their own self-interests, and sadly, this remains so today among modern religious leaders.

Escaping the Snare of Traditionalism

So, what can be done to escape this evil? Jesus tells us plainly in verse 14 of our text: “Listen to me everyone, and understand this.” The way we escape the snare of human tradition is to listen to Jesus. In other words, we are to take him and his teaching seriously. This means we do more than just hear his word; we also understand it and act on it. This is the biblical meaning of listening — to hear and obey. Elsewhere, Jesus warns against hearing and failing to act on his word. In Matthew, Jesus says “everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on a rock . . . But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand” (Matthew 7:24-27). James echoes his Lord, saying,

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do (James 1:22-25).

The practice of hearing and *not* doing, belongs to human tradition. It is the leading characteristic of human tradition, for as we have already heard, human religious traditions breed only two things — hypocrisy and vain worship. And just as there are those who hear and do not do, there are also those who preach and do not practice what they preach. “Like people, like priests” says the prophet, Hosea (Hosea 4:9). Neither people nor priest hear and obey the word of God and both will likewise be condemned. Jesus once told a crowd, including his disciples, “The teachers

² A paraphrase.

of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So, you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach" (Matthew 23:1-3). To preach and not do what one preaches is to prove oneself a hypocrite. Traditionalists then and now are long on oratory and short on deeds. So, the way to escape the snare of deadly religious tradition is to hear and obey Jesus — and by extension, his apostles. Yet, Paul tells us the church of the last days will be characterized by those who "maintain the outward appearance of religion, but will have repudiated its power. Avoid people like these" (II Timothy 3:5, NET).

Now, here is a question: To whom are you listening? Are you listening to the voice of traditionalism or to Jesus? Jesus did not seek to find common ground with the Pharisees and teachers of the law. One might have thought he and they would have had much in common. But Jesus rebuked them outright. Elsewhere, Jesus warned his disciples against the leaven of their teaching, saying, "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1). No, the traditionalist and Jesus shared no common ground. The traditionalist stood in opposition to Jesus and his kingdom, and when the divine calendar allowed, they would demand his execution at the hands of the Romans. The dividing line between the traditionalists and Jesus was as clear and stark as that between Satan's realm and the kingdom of God. This is why you must be clear as to whom you are listening.

The Heart of the Matter

This dividing line between the traditionalists and Jesus is revealed also in Jesus' teaching on the true source of defilement. Our text opens with the teachers of the law arriving from Jerusalem, it appears, to examine Jesus and his disciples. These men were not happy that the disciples did not ceremonially wash their hands before eating. So Jesus, having called the crowd together again, declared, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into the them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. If anyone has ears to hear let him hear" (Mark 7:14-16).

Here Mark provides a shining example of the contrast between the traditionalism of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, and the teaching of Jesus. Appearances are everything in traditionalism, but it is the heart that matters to God. And Jesus is teaching that a person is defiled not by things outside, but by what comes out from the person. We ought to note here that the disciples, having been raised to observe the traditions of the elders, did not understand what

Jesus meant. And Jesus rebuked them, asking, “Are you so dull? He asked, ‘Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from outside can defile them? For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then outside the body.’” Mark then adds, “(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean).”

Now, here is where we must understand the covenantal and eschatological context of the gospel. Jesus’ ministry represents the inauguration of the future, eschatological kingdom into the present. Along with his kingdom, he is also anticipating the new covenant he will soon consecrate at the cross, and the new creation which his resurrection will also begin. In his kingdom, and under the new covenant, and in the new creation, it is upon the heart and mind that God will write his law, and therefore all ceremonial law and customs are fulfilled in Jesus. In short, Jesus is teaching from a covenantal and eschatological reality to which the Pharisees and the teachers of the law do not belong.

But the disciples do belong to this covenantal and eschatological reality and so Jesus is careful to instruct them in private, away from the traditionalists and the crowd. And he teaches them that at the heart of the matter is this matter of the human heart. Under the new covenant, God regenerates the heart and mind so that the sinner is made a new creation, old things have passed away, all things become new (see II Corinthians 5:17). Therefore, things such as foods, that do not enter the heart, but the stomach and are then eliminated. “It is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come — sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person” (Mark 7:20-23). Jesus makes clear this essential teaching: the human heart is defiled by sin, and not by food; and ceremonial washing cannot cure it.

This is why Jesus pronounced a divine curse upon the Pharisees and their religious tradition, saying, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean” (Matthew 23:25-26). In human traditionalism, appearance is everything, and it is powerless to produce internal change and restraint. Paul comments,

²⁰ Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? ²² These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. ²³ Such

regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Colossians 2:20-23).

In the final analysis, the only thing human religious tradition produces is hypocrisy. It is therefore deadly to the soul and brings blasphemy to the name of Christ. The world takes note of religious hypocrisy far more than it does the preaching of the gospel. If the world cannot see Jesus, they have little or no interest in hearing about him. Will you begin today to listen to Jesus, and if what you hear conflicts with your religious tradition, will you choose him over your tradition? How do you listen to Jesus? By careful, prayerful, study of Scripture, asking the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus to you as you study. A genuine devotion to regular, prayerful, and contextual reading of Scripture is instrumental to hearing Jesus, and escaping the snare of traditionalism. **AMEN.**

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