

God's Commandments and Human Tradition

Mark 7:1-13

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 23, 2015

Immanuel Lutheran Church

The Pharisees had traditions. Some were ok and some were not. And no human tradition is ok when it is used to condemn others.

Let us talk about a tradition that was ok. The Pharisees and the scribes required everyone to wash their hands before every meal. They also required bathing after being in the marketplace.

The reason the Pharisees and scribes required these things was because God had commanded them through Moses that certain things in the home defiled them in such a way that they were not permitted to approach the presence of God at the temple. In order to purify them from these common household defilements God prescribed that they wash and then wait until the next day. After such washing and waiting they were permitted back into God's presence at the temple.

Also God commanded the priests through Moses that they wash before performing sacrifices. Some of those sacrifices the priests got to eat.

So in order to make sure that everyone was not defiled and that everyone was able to approach the presence of God at the temple, the Pharisees and the scribes invented a tradition to have people wash whenever they were in the marketplace and before every meal and that way no matter what they would not be defiled and would be able to approach the presence of God at the temple.

This tradition was a good one. It helped the people keep the commandment of God.

The problem is that the Pharisees used this good tradition to condemn the Lord's disciples who happened to be having a certain meal without washing their hands prior. The tradition was fine until someone used it to condemn someone else.

There were also bad traditions.

The other problem with having traditions that are not what God commands is that some of them help you keep the word of God and that makes traditions ok. In fact we cannot lead our lives without traditions. We have traditions for all kinds of things both at church and at home. The problem is that sometimes we use the fact that traditions are ok to invent traditions which are contrary to the commandments of God. The Pharisees and the scribes had a tradition like that one.

The tradition that they had that was contrary to the commandment of God was to allow a young person to dedicate their life to God in such a way that they served God at the sanctuary and were not at home with their parents obeying their parents' will. This tradition allowed a young person to tell his father and mother that they would not be receiving his services, but rather he would devote his service to God at the temple.

This tradition makes sense to human reason because God is so almighty and so all powerful and so all important that surely devoting oneself to service to Him at the place of His residence is more important than doing some ordinary household task that everybody does anyway like honoring your father and your mother.

The problem is that the tradition makes it possible and even encourages young people to break the commandment of God. God designated some people to serve Him at the temple. He did not designate everyone to serve Him at the temple. God did command that all of us honor our father and our mother. Since that is what God commanded any tradition that makes it possible to tell one's parents that they will no longer receive your service, but rather you are going to the temple to serve is evil.

No matter how noble serving at the temple sounds to human reason God has commanded us to honor our father and our mother. Therefore anything that takes us away from that is evil. This tradition of the Pharisees and the scribes is wrong altogether.

And any tradition that is used to condemn another person, even if the tradition is useful in keeping the commandments of God, is evil.

It is therefore incumbent upon us to know what God has commanded and what He has not. It is incumbent upon us to know what God has forbidden and what God has not. If we do not know what God has commanded and what God has forbidden we will wind up condemning people for things for which God does not condemn them or we will wind up condoning things that God does not condone. Either way is evil.

Therefore know your Scriptures. Know what God has said. Check out my sermons against the Scripture. Did Pastor preach to us the Word of God today or did he give us a nice tradition to follow? If he gave us a tradition to follow, is the tradition useful in keeping the commandments of God or is it contrary to the commandments of God? And useful or not if pastor did give us a tradition to follow, neither he nor we can use it to condemn someone else.

For example, God commands pastors to preach the Word of God. That is the commandment. God has commanded congregations to heed the word of God. That is what God has commanded. Our congregation has traditions regarding the Word of God. For example, I wear vestments. I wear a robe. I wear a stole. I have cincture and a cross. God has not commanded me to wear any of these things. They are useful traditions because they mark the preacher that God has called to preach reminding us of the authority that He gives to the preacher who brings His word.

This tradition cannot be used to condemn another preacher. There are plenty of preachers who do not wear vestments when they preach the Word of God. Some of them wear suits. Some of them wear only a shirt and slacks. Some of them wear shorts and a T-shirt. You may debate which tradition is more useful, but you may not condemn. Once you condemn someone for wearing a T-shirt while preaching the Word of God you have judged them according to a human tradition and you fall under God's judgment for making a human tradition more important than God's word.

Neither can the preacher who preaches in a T-shirt condemn the preacher who wears vestments. The preacher in the T-shirt cannot condemn the preacher who wears vestments by saying that the preacher who wears vestments has a tradition and the preacher who wears a T-shirt does not. Many preachers who wear T-shirts when they preach are trying to become all things to all men as God commands Saint Paul to do in 1Corinthians, chapter nine. Therefore the T-shirt is simply one more example of a human tradition that humans deploy when preaching the word of God.

As an aside, dear Lutherans, that means that the Baptists, and the Evangelicals, and the nondenominational congregations in this country have just as many traditions and customs as you do. They may seem to be less ceremonial than you are, but they are just as ceremonial as you are. They simply have a different ceremony.

The issue then becomes are you going to condemn them for something that God has neither commanded nor forbidden? If you do, you have placed your traditions above the commandments of God. If you do, you worship the Lord in vain and you teach as doctrines of God nothing other than the commandments of men.

Now I have given you just one example. There are numerous examples that Satan will use to tempt us to place our traditions above the commandments of God. Is organ music or guitar music

superior? While there might be practical considerations for such a question, God endorses in His word both the use of stringed instruments and the use of pipes. Is the use of an altar good or not? While such a tradition may be useful in helping us to understand the unique qualities of the Sacrament of the Altar what our Lord told us to do at the Sacrament was to eat and to drink. The use of certain songs, hymns, and spiritual songs are all determined by tradition. Whether a worship board makes the determination or a praise band makes the determination, the determination is made by a group of human beings. They will make those musical selections on the basis of their traditions. What God commands is that hymns, songs, and spiritual songs be sung and that such singing be filled with His Word. Anything else is human tradition. Some traditions may help us keep the word of God better than others, but they are traditions nonetheless. Once a tradition is used to condemn other people, it is evil.

The reason that condemning other people with human tradition is evil is because it places the commandments of men above the commandments of God.

Satan can use all manner of things to tempt you to put your ideas above God's word. For example what should the arrangement of the pews in the chapel of our congregation be? What kind of flooring should the capital improvement people put in the sanctuary? What should the design of the Divine Service be? After all only preaching, the Sacrament of the Altar, Baptisms, reading of the Scripture, prayers, singing God's praises and the receiving of the offering are commanded. How we do those things is largely left to us. We have to do it somehow and so we develop traditions for doing those things. What shall those traditions be? What kind of clothing shall we wear to Divine Service? All God does is command women to be modest. He does not say how they should be modest. He simply commands modesty. Satan will use that commandment to tempt you to make your notions about appropriate clothing at the Divine Service a standard by which you condemn other people. Should there be a cross in the chancel of our congregation or should the statue of Jesus in the chapel return? Should we always keep things the way that we were when we were young? Should we only allow the changes that we think are good regardless of how other members of the congregation may feel about it?

Tricky thing human traditions. You must have them in order to keep God's commandments. You cannot use them to condemn others because if you do then you are teaching human commandments as if they are the doctrines of men. You are elevating human tradition to a standard for condemnation. And only God may condemn.

And so what is the big deal.

I must admit that on the occasion of my son's baptism I was hoping for a passage that had something more cosmic to say than this. But on the occasion of a Baptism the word of the Lord is always appropriate. And I could have changed the passage anyway. The assignment of the passage is a human tradition. But it is God's command that His word be preached and why this word as opposed to any thing else?

Here is the big deal: our Lord's goal for your life in the present is a clean conscience. We have been talking the past several Sunday's about our Lord's ultimate goal for you which is resurrection from the dead. But His goal for His disciples right now in the immediate is a clean conscience.

He wants you to acknowledge that you have a conscience. He wants you to pay attention to the condition of your conscience. He wants you to know that your conscience can be defiled. He wants you to have a clean conscience.

The conscience is that part of your spiritual life that assesses your standing in front of God. It answers this question: How do I stand with God? Does He favor me or does He oppose me? And do not assume that God favors everyone. He does not. He did not favor Pharaoh. He favored King Saul for a

while and then rejected him. He favored Jacob. He did not favor Esau. God opposes people. Does He oppose you? Your conscience is designed to answer that question.

In order to answer this question, the conscience is equipped with a general working knowledge of God's will. Most of us know that murder is wrong whether or not anyone has taught us that. There are a few people who do not know that murder is wrong because their conscience is faulty. But most of us do. The problem with the conscience's knowledge of God's Law is that it is not complete in its detail. In order for the conscience to have complete knowledge of God's Law it needs God's Word and commandments.

Without a knowledge of God's Word and commandments the conscience can fall into one of two traps. The first is to think that some things that are contrary to God's commandments are ok even though God has forbidden them. That is a subject for another sermon. Certainly examples of this abound. What our Lord is dealing with this morning is the second problem of an ignorant conscience: some people can convince it that it has sinned when it really has not. These people convince your conscience that it has sinned when they condemn you for doing something that God has not forbidden.

There are people who feel bad about doing something in the sanctuary or in church because others condemn them for something they have done even when the thing that they have done is not contrary to God's commandments. Such people who make such condemnations are outside of God's will. They are teaching the commandments of men as if they were God's teachings. And the people who are condemned are burdened by a conscience that thinks that it has done wrong when in reality it has done no wrong.

Experience has shown that the strongest condemnations come upon your conscience by people who know that you have done nothing wrong, but in order to cover up their own sins they are going to focus the attention of your conscience on something that is neither here nor there because God has not spoken to it.

I realize that in our society it seems like the big problem is that people have consciences who do not acknowledge sin even when God's commandments call it sin. But that does not mean that other problem has gone away. There are plenty of people who believe that they are condemned in the eyes of God because of something that they did that wasn't even wrong. It was simply different from someone else's tradition and that person condemned them for it.

People, the condemnation must cease. But more than that, the ignorance must cease. Let us be more familiar with what God has commanded and what He has not. Let us be more familiar with what He has forbidden and what He has not. Let us be more firmly grounded in His word so that when our conscience feels ashamed, it feels ashamed for something that we did that was really contrary to God's word and not some human tradition. If our conscience is going to accuse us of guilt, let it accuse us of guilt of which God Himself would accuse us and not feel guilty about breaking some lowly human tradition.

In the end our Lord is concerned about how you stand in front of God. Does He favor you? In order to answer that question your conscience will need to be able to assess whether or not you have sinned because God will only condemn you for sins and not because you broke some human tradition. And more importantly if you are going to be forgiven by the death and resurrection of Jesus, you are going to be forgiven of your violations of God's commandments and not for some violation of human tradition.

Once forgiveness is administered for those things which really are sins and it does not get bogged down in human traditions then you know that you have a clean conscience and a good standing in front of Almighty God.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.