

***“Good Tradition, Bad Tradition”*** (Mark 7:1-13)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. There’s a fun musical called “Fiddler on the Roof,” and many are familiar with the song, “Tradition!”

ALL:

Tradition, tradition! Tradition!

Tradition, tradition! Tradition!

TEVYE & PAPAS:

Who, day and night, must scramble for a living,

Feed a wife and children, say his daily prayers?

And who has the right, as master of the house,

To have the final word at home?

ALL:

The papa, the papa! Tradition.

The papa, the papa! Tradition.

GOLDE & MAMAS:

Who must know the way to make a proper home,

A quiet home, a kosher home?

Who must raise the family and run the home,

So Papa's free to read the holy books?

ALL:

The mama, the mama! Tradition!

The mama, the mama! Tradition!

You may hear those words and want to question that *version* of tradition, “Hold on a minute, that may be *your* tradition, but it isn’t necessarily mine!” And yet, even when traditions differ, almost everyone engages in some sort of tradition. But isn’t that just a “traditional” assumption? Not at all, whether someone is a traditionalist (born before ’46), a baby boomer (born between ’46 and ’64), a generation x’r (born between ’65-’79), a millennial (born between ’80-’95), or a “generation edge” or a “plural” (born after ’96), all of these have traditions.

The game of baseball has endured in our country. It is chalk-full of traditions. Across generational lines, many are familiar with and take part in the 7<sup>th</sup>-inning stretch! Almost all of us have traditions which impact the way we eat food. Your tradition might hold fast to a sacred table; or your tradition might be that favorite drive through (or a little of both). Almost everyone I know has a Sunday tradition...be it in church, on a bike, on the beach or in the garage...traditions abound!

And the concept is even somewhat controversial in the Christian Church:

1. Roman Catholicism views tradition as being *alongside of* Scripture to the extent that tradition is said to transmit the Word of God. Thus the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “[The Church] does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone.” (p 31)
2. Eastern Orthodoxy affirms that Scripture presupposes Tradition...and views that Tradition as a necessary *milieu* for making Scripture understandable and meaningful. (John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, ’78, 15-16)

These definitions are interesting, but we have to be careful not to lose the priority and authority of the Word of God. Robert Preus explained, “We must say, however, that in practice both the Eastern and Western fathers [of the early church before the more recent positions that I just told you about] as a rule gave much more deference to Scripture than to any traditional rule of faith. Creeds were written on the basis of Scripture and in terminology that was clearly biblical; likewise commentaries and treatises of all sorts were based on Scripture as the source of doctrine.” (Norman L. Geilser, ed., *Inerrancy*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, ’80, 359-360)

But in our Gospel today in Mark 7, the Lord Jesus is warning against yet another form of “tradition”: it is not merely the tradition of men (of what comes from men or what is generated from men), but what comes from men at the *expense* of the Word of God; when the Word of God is intentionally *replaced* by the traditions of men. When this happens tradition becomes a very bad thing. In fact, the words “bad thing” are a considerable understatement...when tradition replaces Scripture then tradition becomes a terrible thing; an extremely destructive thing.

As we consider this great problem presented in Mark 7 we are taken to Jesus being confronted by Pharisees with some scribes. They confront the Lord while defending their tradition. They asked him, “*Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?*” (v 5)

The history behind the tradition of the elders is intricate, but without getting into the detail, the bottom line is that in the minds of these religious leaders they had a good rationale for going above and beyond the Word of God. They thought that their tradition put them in a *better* position to honor God, and they had utterly deceived themselves into actually believing this. As a result – and most ironically – they ended up actually going against God. Jesus tells it like it is:

“*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; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!” (vv 6-9)*

I am struck by our assigned epistle lesson for today from Ephesians 5:22-33. It comes at an important time. I want you all to know how big I am regarding not confusing the two kingdoms so clearly established in our biblical, Christian tradition. There is a church realm – the kingdom of grace – and there is a governmental realm – the kingdom of power. In my doctoral dissertation I bemoaned and elaborated upon – profusely in fact – the great problem involved when churches align themselves with political parties. It is an enormous mistake. The moment that happens, you take that which is eternal (what the Church is supposed to embrace) and you tie it down to that which is always in flux. Politics by nature change. But if one ties the Church to politics, then one will inevitably force the Church to compromise. That's why Church and politics don't mix.

However, that does not mean that when the political sphere encroaches upon the Church...when the political sphere forsakes its sphere and assumes to take on the realm of what belongs to the Church, then everything is *not* peaceful in the valley. When the culture or the politics within culture take the traditions of men and put those traditions over and above the Word of God, the Church cannot remain silent.

So God speaks in Ephesians: *"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."* (Eph. 5:31) This is God's tradition. This is the holiest tradition. This is the authoritative tradition, because it comes down from the Creator of men and women; of male and female. But how often do people apply a new "tradition," and use the rationale that if you're really representing God then you will embrace their ethic of "love" which *they* say actually represents God and when this happens – make no mistake about it – then the Word of God is absolutely replaced.

The Lord Jesus, however, pulls no punches in bringing out the catastrophic nature of this problem. When a person acts religious in front of other people...and they actually *believe* that their way is right, but all the while they are rejecting the Word of God, then Jesus says that this person is a hypocrite. Lenski wrote, *"The worst form of hypocrisy is that which carries its self-deception to the point where it thinks that it really is what it actually only pretends to be."* (*Mark's Gospel*, 287) This is a terrifying place to be, and it is unsettling because we don't have to keep picking on the Pharisees in Mark 7, nor do we get to just stand at a distance as we discuss the terrible "politics" of our time...because this problem is right here in our hearts.

How often we have tried and have actually said that what I am doing; what I have decided; how I will live...is in accord with the way things ought to be. We replace God's authority with our own; and we effectively replace God's Word with our own life tradition. We do this all the time and when we do so – in accord with our sinful nature – then we live as hypocrites.

We cringe at this accusation. A hypocrite is a false one. He or she is not really what they claim to be. Surely, I go too far to put us all in this category. No I don't. It is absolutely true that we behave hypocritically. This is one of the reasons why I like studying and teaching about the Pharisees...it is like looking into a mirror and seeing all people, us included, me included, you included. We want to object: "But I really am a Christian!" Of course you are, but you also a

sinner, and sinners are expert hypocrites. They do what they ought not to do and sometimes they do it when they absolutely know better not to.

We laugh sometimes when parents correct their children, “Do as I say, not as I do!” Every parent knows their inconsistency and the older our children get the more they see it, but...those children are getting older and growing up too and guess what...they have the same problem. It’s pandemic; it’s universal, we all have the bug!

I have to tell you though, I almost decided not to preach on our Gospel today in Mark 7 because as you may have noticed there is really no gospel – good news – in this Mark 7 Gospel! It is completely accusatory. It is all bad news. People are hypocrites, but I had to back up and say, “Wait a minute, even if the gospel itself is not explicit and perhaps one would say not even implicit, what is nevertheless true is that Jesus was reaching out to these Pharisees!” He didn’t just give up on ‘em. He didn’t say, “You’re all a lost cause, I’m not even gonna try to explain the problem to you.” We have to remember that whenever our Lord took the time and made the effort to warn and to convict, He did it for one reason and one reason only: out of astounding love for sinners like you and me. But what is even more amazing is that we know the rest of the story: the Lord Jesus took on the flesh – the same flesh – as hypocritical sinners. The Lord Jesus went to the cross with hypocrisy falling on His person so that He is properly identified as becoming our sin (2<sup>nd</sup> Cor. 5:21) and taking our curse (Gal. 3:13)...the sin of hypocrites; the curse of hypocrites...covering with His blood every inconsistency in thought, word and deed you have ever committed. Jesus ripped your hypocrisy from your being and placed it firmly upon Himself and said, “Here, I am the hypocrite; I am the sinful traditionalist and you, you get my holy tradition...and it is powerful; it is the life-giving and redeeming tradition.”

The tradition that you get is the saving one. It is the tradition of Holy Baptism that the Word of God clearly identifies as a saving flood...baptism now saves (1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3)...that is Divine tradition; that is God’s tradition; that is binding tradition! To you is given the tradition of Holy Absolution, the Office of the Keys...when you confess your hypocrisy; God covers you in holiness: “Forgiven!” He says...and He sees your hypocrisy no more. In His eyes, as you are now covered by the blood of the Lamb, any and all hypocrisy is gone as far as the east is from the west. His tradition and now your real, substantial and most serious tradition is the reception of His body and blood...and this tradition keeps you in Christ and since you receive the Holy One...the devil has no foot to stand on when you tries to pin hypocrisy on you. The accusation won’t hold up, because you are in Christ and Christ is in you. God’s tradition trumps false tradition; good tradition overpowers bad tradition...now the tradition that counts is this: Christ is for you and because He is, God does not declare you a hypocrite any more, but instead since Christ stands for you, He sees you in His holy tradition: the Word of God and the Holy Sacraments are not replaced, but they are resplendent...yours is the Holy Tradition; yours is a new life, a new identity. God has forgiven all your hypocrisy. Let us live in accord with this new life! Let us embrace this new tradition!