

Tradition and God's Word

Mark 7 tells one of the more well-known accounts of Jesus' confrontations with the Pharisees. The Pharisees and some scribes had seen Jesus' disciples eating with "impure" or unwashed hands. The tradition of the elders was that they were to wash their hands very carefully before eating, and then when they return from the market place they would not eat unless carefully cleaning themselves. Additionally, "there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots." So these Pharisees confronted Jesus about his disciples not doing this: "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" (v. 5)

Before considering Jesus' answer, let's note a few items. First, there is something good about keeping yourself clean. Washing hands before you eat is good practice; there was nothing inherently wrong here, and most of us would promote this as healthy practice. Second, tradition, in itself, is not the problem. It is simply something that is passed down to others. Tradition is unavoidable in many ways. Coupled with being clean in this context, tradition can be noteworthy and good. It is something we might all like to pass down to our children. Third, notice that the appeal of the Pharisees is the tradition. They did not ask about the disciples breaking the Law of God.

The essence of Jesus' response is: first, He called these Pharisees hypocrites; second, He quoted Isaiah 29; third, He showed how they were placing their traditions above God's commandments.

Isaiah 29 comes in the middle of a context in which Isaiah is rebuking God's people for the sins of idolatry and apathy toward His covenant. The first chapter of Isaiah rebukes Israel for merely going through the motions without really desiring to please God. They were offering their sacrifices, but then they were going out and committing all kinds of evil. Ironically, Isaiah does tell the people to wash themselves and make themselves clean (Isa 1:16). However, his emphasis was not physical, spiritual: "Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight." This was the way they were to clean themselves, and it is a far more important kind of washing than we can ever do with the hands.

In Isaiah 29, one of the phrases is this: "their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote" (v. 13). That is, the extent of their respect for God was, at best, learned tradition. That tradition was not in itself the Law. They appeared to care little for the Law itself, but were concerned about keeping a tradition in place even though it was not Law.

When Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites, He was noting how they were neglecting the commandments of God for the sake of their traditions. Now here they were chastising others for

failing to keep a tradition while they themselves were guilty of the violation of God's commands. The beam in their eye was much larger than any speck in the eyes of the disciples of Jesus, who were not breaking God's Law on this occasion.

Traditions are a part of life. We really cannot do without them. To one degree or another, all that we know is passed down. Railing against tradition just because something is a tradition is rather naive. Even the commands of God are traditions handed down to us (2 Thess 2:15).

How we act about these traditions may be another matter. Again, we must distinguish between traditions that are commandments of God and traditions that are handed down otherwise. If we put man-made traditions on par with, or even over, God's word, then we are guilty of something very insidious. This is the point made in Isaiah 29:15-16. By putting their own traditions on par with God's commands, they were essentially saying that they were God's equal. They were guilty of pulling God down to their level and acting as though He did not have sufficient understanding of what they needed. They were smarter than God. If we think that breaking our own human traditions is on par with breaking God's word, then we are guilty of bringing God down to our level. That's serious business for which we need to repent.

Jesus illustrated how they had disrespected God by showing their neglect of the command to honor father and mother. They were more concerned about washing their hands than they were about caring for their parents. Talk about upside down! Yet, if we are not careful, we can fall into the same trap. Human traditions change, but what we receive from God's word will never change. Let us be careful to make that distinction. Even more, let us always be careful to engage in God's will over our own.

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Going Beyond Scripture

"Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?" (1 Cor 4:6-7)

It's always tempting to think that our ideas are better than what Scripture reveals. This passage reminded the Corinthians that when they boasted, were puffed up against the apostles, or listened to those other than Christ and the apostles and prophets as their authority, they were being arrogant and acting as though what they had was of their own doing.

Why would we boast about something that we have received? If we do, are we not being arrogant and acting superior to others? Then, when we are using something other than what is written as our authority, is that also not a form of arrogance?

Yet isn't this what is happening when we get away from Scripture? Traditions are not bad in themselves, and biblical tradition is necessary (2 Thess 2:15), but when we think that extra-biblical tradition is on par with, or even above, Scripture, then we have become arrogant (cf. Mark 7:9).

There are religious groups that hold their traditions as being just as valuable as the written text. They believe that the councils of the past, the experiences of the "fathers," and the wisdom of the present is as authoritative as the Scriptures. They don't even deny that their practices cannot be found in Scripture. They rather affirm that the practices are authorized on the basis of some form of apostolic succession. Authority has been passed down, and they are beneficiaries.

Yet where does that stop? Once we get away from the text of Scripture as being the standard, there is no true stopping point, for the wisdom of men will take over. The next group of wise men and leaders from their tradition can make changes, claim authority, and people are just supposed to follow. How does that differ substantively from what the Pharisees were doing?

Today's wisdom, even among many who claim to be following the Bible only, is that we may still adjust our doctrine and practice to match the prevailing attitudes of the day. Need we bring up "gay marriage" as an example? A few references to "love" in the Bible, and suddenly just about anything goes as long as we can attach our version of "love" to it. Practices that are clearly spelled out as works of the flesh, keeping people from inheriting the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10), are quickly anointed as being holy on the basis that love covers it all. Forget the text. Just go with our interpretations of love.

The issue here is not whether everything must be specified to be authorized. I really don't know anyone who thinks that. The issue is whether we can legitimately establish, from Scripture, our practices and beliefs. If we can't, and we do it anyway, are we not being arrogant?

What have we received? Paul answers: "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe" (1 Thess 2:13).

Isaiah reminded the people of his day that there is a stark difference between what God thinks and what people think, between what God intends for His word to accomplish, and what we think might work better. This reminder is just as significant now, for we are constantly in a battle for a standard. The question is whether or not we will trust God's word, or whether we think it necessary at some point to go beyond Scripture in order to establish practices that are nowhere near what Scripture teaches.

For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord.
"For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.
"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
And do not return there without watering the earth
And making it bear and sprout,
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;
So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
It will not return to Me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire,
And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. (Isa 55:8-11)

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