

TRADITION AND THE WORD OF GOD

Mark 7:1-23

Key Verse: 7:8

"You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

This passage is about the Pharisees who came from Jerusalem to find a basis for a charge against Jesus. It was because they had been alarmed by Jesus' popularity and had already determined to kill Jesus (Jn 5:18). Jesus is the Messiah for whom his people had been waiting a long time. But when the Messiah came his people did not accept him (Jn 1:11). In this passage we learn that human tradition is good, but it must be corrected by the living word of God whenever it is necessary. Otherwise, tradition corrupts people and it makes people habitual like an animal. Most of all, we learn that the word of God is the old, old story, but it is applicable to all generations.

I. The tradition of the Jews (1-8)

First, the Pharisees and traditions (1-5). The kingdoms of Israel and Judah had been overrun and the people taken into captivity or scattered by the Assyrians (721 B.C.) and Babylonians (586 B.C.). After the exile to Babylon (586-516 B.C.), Nehemiah and Ezra were the leaders of God's people. When Nehemiah and Ezra saw their people, they were like slaves. Their children could not speak their own language. They spoke so many foreign languages and dialects. The tragedy was that they only wanted to eat more and pick fights with one another over trivial things. What is worse, they had forgotten the concept of God and the law of God. When they forgot God, they were nothing but hungry animals. But there was Nehemiah, who had a fear of God. He beat them, pulled out their hair and rebuked them to be more like God's people (Neh 13:23-28). From then on, they began to receive discipline. Among the disciplined people, outstanding people were chosen to be the Pharisees. At that time, "the Pharisee" meant great.

To the Jews, the traditions of the elders became an important part of their lives. Through tradition, they did not remain as slaves with a slave mentality. Through tradition, they edified themselves and grew strong. Through tradition, they enhanced themselves as a people with identity and exemplary heritage. Their tradition enabled them to endure any kind of hardship. They could spread all over the world. Still, they kept their traditions and they were prosperous.

The Pharisees had indeed been the elite of Israel. But in a matter of time, they obtained social and political position; they became corrupted and the tradition of the Jews became superficial. In Jesus' time, the Pharisees were not known as the elite of Israel, but as the most diabolic hypocrites. The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples

eating food with unwashed hands. To the Pharisees, the disciples broke the tradition of ceremonial washing. They broke the tradition of ceremonial washing and ate food very deliciously with unwashed hands. It was a serious matter for the Pharisees because the disciples broke the traditions of the elders. At that time, breaking the tradition of the elders meant rebelling against the people in authority. In other words, by breaking the tradition of ceremonial washing, the disciples were misunderstood as revolutionaries.

Concerning a handwashing ceremony, it is said that people held out their hands with their fingertips pointing upward and water was poured over their hands until it ran down their wrists. The minimum amount of water used was half an eggshell full. The tradition was good. But when it was degenerated it was nothing but a comedian's show. Not only did they keep the handwashing ceremony, they observed many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles (4). We saw the sad story in the movie "Fiddler on the Roof" of how three daughters struggled to keep the tradition and, at the same time, to marry the men they liked, even if they violated Jewish traditions.

Usually the Pharisees did not confront Jesus face to face to ask questions. But this time they were overconfident and approached Jesus to accuse his disciples of breaking the traditions. Look at verse 5. "So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, 'Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?'" In this way, the tradition lost its original spirit. In this way, the tradition transposed into a political tool of people in authority.

Second. Jesus teaches the Pharisees that they should honor God with their hearts (6-8). The Pharisees were supposed to be the shepherds of God's people. They should take care of his suffering people. They should pray that his people would be raised as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex 19:6). But they were too corrupted to do so. Matthew 23:24 says, "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." Again, Matthew 23:27 says, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean." After rebuking them, Jesus defended his disciples who ate food deliciously with unwashed hands. Look at verses 6-7. "He replied, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." Jesus rebuked the Pharisees that they lost the spirit of the traditions based on the law of God, which had edified and renovated and even made the people of Israel a new people. When they lost the spirit of the traditions, they became like the people of the former U.S.S.R. before Gorbachev. They said, "We pretend to work and the government pretends to pay us." Moreover, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees that they became slaves of traditions. And they forgot the law of God. When they forgot the law of God they abandoned God. As a result, the Pharisees became so evil that they strained out a gnat but swallowed a camel.

The second clause of the Declaration of Independence states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." In this clause, "these truths" refers to the absolutes of God. "Unalienable Rights" does not mean to indulge fallen man's sinful freedom, but to exercise the freedom of choice endowed by God. This Declaration later became our American

heritage. Like the traditions of the Jewish people, it became the tradition of America. When our forefathers used a God-centered tradition, God blessed this country abundantly. When they were blessed abundantly, most people abandoned God and only enjoyed sinful human freedom in the name of liberty. Our ancestors were happy when they had a fear of God in their hearts. And when they used their unalienable rights in God, they were happy. But these days, to their frustration, when people only enjoyed sinful human freedom, so many became mental patients and drug addicts and depression patients, and so many contemplate suicide. In light of American history, abandoning God is the same as abandoning unutterable happiness from above. When people abandoned the absolutes of God, our American heritage or tradition degenerated to cultural diseases. When people go to Las Vegas and become a couple overnight without holy matrimony, most people think they are okay. But if anyone wants to establish God's family through holy matrimony before God, most people think that he is crazy. This small American social consensus reveals that this country has set aside its Christian heritage and turned into an anti-Christian nation.

Tradition is good. Civilization is good. Cultural development is good. But whatever is made by man cannot be maintained for good. Man must follow the word of God. The word of God is lifegiving and everlasting. The word of God is the old, old story, but still it was very real to the people in the early days and to the people in the middle ages and to the people in the modern days, especially for the American people. The Gerasene demoniac is an old, old story. But this is a story about a man's tragedy when he enjoyed sinful pleasure only.

II. Jesus rebukes their impure hearts (9-23)

First, Jesus rebukes the corrupted hearts of the Pharisees (9-13). Because they were people of God, they should obey the law of God. But when they kept the traditions of the elders and degenerated to cultural diseases, they were utterly corrupted. What is corruption? Corruption does not necessarily mean the corruption of the leg or skin which makes people look like lepers. Corruption means the corruption of one's heart, because the heart is the center of the body and soul. When their hearts were corrupt they could not remember the commands of God. Verse 10 says, "For

Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'" This is the fifth commandment of God (Ex 20:12). They must honor their parents as long as they are right with God. But the Pharisees and synagogue leaders thought that inactive old parents were not beneficial. So they made a rule of Corban, which means, "a gift devoted to God." In the Jewish society, grandfather and grandmother and father and mother and grandchildren lived altogether. They were family-centered people. Most of them served their old parents until they passed away. But the Pharisees began to use the rule of Corban, saying, "I am sorry. I really wanted to live with you at my house. But I made all my money Corban. So I hope you can move into a nursing home and take care of yourself." In this way, the Pharisees displeased God and let his people go astray. Why are grandfather and grandmother necessary? It is not enough for children to be loved only by their parents. They also need grandfather's and grandmother's love and care. But these days there are many young people who think that their grandparents are not beneficial. So they send their old parents to nursing homes to cry. What could be a solution to prevent the corruption of the heart? We must come back to the word of God.

Many people think that Bible study is another burden in addition to their school studies. But that is a blind mistake. 1 Peter 1:23 says, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." When Jesus satisfied the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, people liked Jesus. But when Jesus talked about the bread of life (Jn 6:35), people began to run away one by one until only the disciples were left. Jesus asked, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:67-69). 1 Peter 1:24,25a says, "For, 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.'" Those who live in the world without God are always weary and thirsty, even if they drink a lot. But those who abide in the word of God are like a tree planted by streams of water (Ps 1:3,4). Most importantly, the word of God is God himself (Jn 1:1). This country needs direction because human sinful freedom took away the word of God from most American young people. These days, those who study the word of God diligently are known as "fundamentalist" or cult members. But from God's point of view, this is the right time for Americans to come back to God and study the Bible diligently so that they may be healed from cultural diseases, and that they may be freed from the torment of the devil.

Second, it's a heart problem (14-23). When we study the Bible, especially Leviticus, God taught his holy children concerning the clean and unclean problem. It is because they are holy children of God. God wanted them to eat holy things. God wanted them to speak and act holy. God wanted them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But in Jesus' time, the clean and unclean problem was only related to ceremony. If one performed a handwashing ceremony he was clean. If one grew a moustache and beard he was ceremonially clean. Jesus told them that it is not a ceremonial problem but a heart problem. "Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him "unclean" by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him "unclean" (14,15). In short, food cannot make people unclean. One's heart can make him unclean.

After Jesus left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. Jesus rebuked them, "Are you so dull?" and explained, "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean') (18-19). Here Jesus plainly says that the Pharisees' hearts are not right with God. Their hearts are corrupted and they have no word of God. They made use of his suffering people and they wanted to destroy the work of God which was being carried out by Jesus. It is unbelievable that the chosen people became so petty, plagued by tradition and culture. It is unbelievable that they wanted to destroy Jesus.

In this passage we learn that all men are very habitual like animals. Most people live according to social consensus like dead fish floating down the stream. We must not be victims of tradition or cultural diseases. We must come back to the word of God.