

**Mark 7: 1-13; “Holding the Traditions of Men”, Sermon # 39 in the series –
“Astonished at His Teaching”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on November 29th, 2015, in the Morning Worship Service.**

The protest of our Lord Jesus, in these verses, is regarding the unholy traditions of the elders of Israel in His day. We need to understand that one of the greatest reasons that Jesus Christ came into the world was to bear witness to the truth. He says in John 18: 37 – “For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth.” “Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” In this chapter we find God’s truth personified meeting man’s tradition personified. We find many people needing to “hear the voice of Jesus”. In these verses, we find Jesus rejecting and condemning the tradition of the elders of Israel which was held by the Pharisees and by some of the scribes. We find that He clearly stated His reasons for this. And we can see that there were three traditions which Jesus felt that he had to confront and refute. He did not do this secretly and privately, but rather, He did it publicly and to their faces. This was because Jesus knew that many, many people in that day were being deceived by these traditions. And we can also say that many people, perhaps even people whom we love, are being deceived by traditions in our own day as well. It is very important to the eternal salvation of each and every person that they come to reject the traditions of men if they are to find the salvation of God. The 1st tradition that Jesus confronted was their tradition of hand-washings. The 2nd tradition which He confronted was their lip-worship. And the 3rd tradition that He confronted was their rejecting the commandments of God in order to hold to their own traditions. Let us examine our own lives and see whether we are holding to any of these traditions and whether we need to hear the voice of Jesus speaking to us in the way that we think and live.

1st of all – The first tradition that Jesus confronted was the tradition of hand-washings. (Verses 1-5)

“Then the Pharisees and some of scribes came to together to Jesus, having come from Jerusalem.” “Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault.” And verse 5 says that they asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?” A good number of the verses which are given to us here in Mark Chapter 7 have as their focus the subject of tradition. We must begin by stating that not all traditions are bad for the Christian. There are traditions which we are commanded to observe, which are written down for us in the Bible. 2nd Thessalonians 2: 15 says, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” A good tradition, as Paul defined it, was the truth of the gospel, or the truth of God’s word, being lived out by Christians; a tradition which was handed down by Christ to His apostles, and then by the apostles to other Christians, or others whom they hoped to see become Christians. It was handed down by word of mouth or by a letter from them. It was something that Paul says was taught. Tradition was the form of doctrine which Paul delivered unto them; but it was also the habitual practice of that truth; of a person’s learning to walk the walk of a Christian; even as God’s word commanded. This is what he delivered to them and which he would have them to hand down to others.

Listen to 2nd Thessalonians 3: 6. “But we command you, brethren, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.” What Paul is saying is that you and I are not called to accept the way every professed Christian lives their life. Some people walk in a disorderly fashion. We are to compare that person’s words and actions to the word of God, and we are to withdraw from those persons who are living a disorderly life. In verse 7, Paul appeals to his own good behavior and the good behavior of those persons who were with him while he was

preaching the gospel. “For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone’s bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us.” These are holy traditions; living according to words and example of Christ’s holy Apostles. Let no one despise them. For if he does despise them, he despises the word of God and thus despises God’s expectation of how we should live.

One of the worst aspects of holding to traditions which are not commanded in the word of God is a group of self-righteous persons finding fault with people who do not do things spiritually in the way that they do them. It would be one thing if these people had become indignant with Jesus because He had violated some righteous principle from God’s word. God’s word is the authority for everything that we do spiritually. But their indignation and their fault-finding was based on the fact that Jesus and His disciples were not falling in line with the teachings of some famous rabbis’ teachings; teachings which they took and added to the Scriptures. The truth was, that these Pharisees and Scribes had come out from Jerusalem to see the Lord Jesus because they had heard of the mighty miracles which He was doing, and they were sent to spy on Him to see if they could find anything wrong with the things that He and His disciples were doing. They didn’t have to look far. It was mealtime and when they looked, they saw something that to them was abominable. Jesus’ disciples were eating bread with defiled hands. They had not washed their hands as all the supposedly spiritual men of that day would have done. This, to them, was something that was outrageous in a person trying to be religious in that day.

What was the reason that they were looking to condemn Jesus? Well, it was because they had been taught by their rabbis, who had been taught by other rabbis, who had been taught by the supposedly greatest of their rabbis, Hillel and Shammai, that these things were to be done regularly by all devout Jews. I am speaking about those things which are mentioned in verses 3 and 4. “For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders.” “When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash.” “And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.” Now, I suppose that these practices got started in relation to keeping oneself undefiled from various sources of ceremonial contamination. I mean the ceremonial laws concerning defilement by leprous persons, and dead bodies, and the various foods, which were considered unclean. But there is no mention in the whole Old Testament of any washing of the hands anywhere, except in Exodus 40, verse 30 where it says that Moses “set up the laver between the tabernacle of meeting and the altar, and put water there for washing; and Moses, Aaron, and his sons would wash their hands and their feet with water from it.” “Whenever they went into the tabernacle of meeting, and when they came near the altar, they washed, as the Lord had commanded Moses.” This ceremonial washing was done to show reverence to God’s holy presence; an acknowledgement that they needed to be cleansed in the way that He proscribed, before they approached Him.

Exodus 30, verse 17 says, “Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ‘You shall also make a laver of bronze, with its base also of bronze, for washing.’” “You shall put it between the tabernacle of meeting and the altar.” “And you shall put water in it, for Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet in the water from it.” “When they go into the tabernacle of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn an offering made by fire to the Lord, they shall wash with water, lest they die.” “So they shall wash their hands and their feet lest they die.” “And it shall be a statute forever to them – to him and his descendants throughout their generations.” But, I want you to see that they did this at God’s command.

They did not go about expecting that others should die if they did not wash their hands before a meal.

This tradition of the elders really had nothing to do with keeping the commandment of God. The many hand-washings before meals were something which was added to it; to make those men and what they were doing, look spiritual. The problem was, that this added ceremonial practice became a commandment of men which was to be observed on the same level as if God had commanded it Himself! The violation of it was something that many of the rabbis thought should be punished by death. Listen to John Gill on this. He is quoting a Rabbi who held Hillel and Shammai in the greatest estimation, and the quote says: "Know then, that the words of the Scribes are more lovely than the words of the law: for, says Rabbi Tarphon, if a man does not read, he only transgresses an affirmative; but if he transgresses the words of the school of Hillel, he is guilty of death, because he hath broken down a hedge, and a serpent shall bite him." "It is a tradition of Rabbi Ishmael; the words of the law have in them both prohibition and permission; some of them are light, and some heavy, but the words of the Scribes are all of the heavy – weightier are the words of the elders, than the words of the prophets." "And elsewhere this advice is given; 'My son, attend the words of the Scribes', more than to the words of the law; for in the words of the law are affirmatives and negatives; but the words of the Scribes; everyone that transgresses the words of the Scribes is guilty of death." Gill says, "This is what they charge the disciples with here, and could they have had their will, would have put them to death for it."

Let me say to you this morning, that one of the reasons that we are Reformed Baptists is that we believe in the Reformation principle, Sola Scriptura. (Scripture only) And the reason that we believe in that principle is because the word of God itself commands that we use this principle as we live our Christian lives. You find it mentioned in two major places in the Old Testament. The first is Deuteronomy chapter 4, verses 1 and 2. "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers is giving you." "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you." You can see from this, a duty which is given to all the people of God, both Old Testament and New. It is that you should not add or take away from all or any of the good words of God. The commandments of God are given to you for your good. In the Old Testament there were many things that were commanded of them in the ceremonial law that we do not follow today as Christians. There were many things that God commanded in the Old Testament in regard to punishments of people who broke, what were to them in that day, the moral commandments related to the ceremonial law. Such things as putting to death a person for gathering sticks on the Sabbath, and excommunicating those who did not perform the rite of circumcision on their children. (Numbers 15: 32 and Genesis 17: 14)

But we would not confess that to do such things now in New Testament times, is the right thing to do. But it was, for them then, because God commanded that it should be so. We must always be studying to show ourselves approved unto God, rightly dividing the word of truth. The Church of Jesus Christ is not under Old Testament Israel's laws, but she is not without law before God. She is to take all the principles of moral responsibility related to God's holy law, both Old Testament and New, and to live them out. If they are related to the ceremonial law which has been fulfilled and set aside, then she is not responsible to inculcate them and do them. A person cannot be justified by keeping the moral law in either Old Testament times, or New. Justification is in both; by faith alone, in Christ. People in the Old Testament times looked forward to Christ and believed in the promises. People in New Testament times look back and believe in the promises of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. But it is always true, as well, that God is only honored and glorified by the keeping of His moral commandments. "Neither

circumcision, nor uncircumcision means anything; but keeping the commandments of God is what matters.” (1 Corinthians 7: 19)

Real and true spiritual cleansing comes by believing, and by living out the word of God, and not men’s traditions. Look over at Proverbs Chapter 30 and verse 5. This is the second place where we find the importance of holding to God’s word and not letting anything be added to it. “Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him.” “Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar.” You can see what the thrust of these words is, can’t you? Every word that God has spoken, and which has been written down for us, is pure. It is not defiled with men’s thoughts. Men’s thoughts, adding to God’s word, can defile it, when we go about to teach others. That is because men are not inherently perfect as God is; they are inherently sinful. And so their additions will not bring men to the state of spiritual freedom that God wants them to be in. “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free, and you shall be free indeed,” Jesus says.

And what is worse, these verses are telling us that anything that we, as men, might add to his words, may later prove us to be liars. God will find out the things which we add to his word which are false, and which are lies, and especially the things that we teach others and expect them to obey. This is the nature of heresy. It is adding to God’s word, the words of men and their commandments; things which turn people away from believing and doing what God would have them to do; both to be saved, and to be holy. Nowadays we find that heresies have come into the Church of Jesus Christ, not so much through the ceremony of the washing of hands; but through the ceremonies related to water baptism. There are some churches which practice ceremonies which are additions to what God has commanded. The washing away of our sins is not accomplished by the ceremony of water baptism. It is pictured by water baptism. Salvation is found by making “an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,” Peter says in 1 Peter 3: 21. Cleanliness is next to godliness is a famous saying of people. But spiritual cleanliness of heart does not come through the ceremony of baptism. It comes by the “washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit” which God poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace (not by baptism) we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3: 6-8) That is how we come to have clean hands and a pure heart.

Now, the 2nd Tradition which Jesus confronted these Pharisees and Scribes over was their lip-worship. (Verses 6-7)

“He answered and said to them, ‘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.’ “And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” Jesus doesn’t mince any words here. He straight-out calls them hypocrites, and He tells them that their worship is fatally flawed. He says to them that God is not being honored with their lips, but rather that their heart is far from Him. Jesus is quoting from the book of Isaiah chapter 29, verse 13. It says there: “Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men, therefore, behold, I will again do a marvelous work and a wonder; for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hidden.”

These words are very revealing are they not? We must never let ourselves come to the place where we are only paying lip-service to God and to His precious word. We become hypocrites when what we confess with our lips to God does not match up with what He sees is going on in our hearts at the same time. In other words, to God, if you are only paying Him lip-service, you are dishonoring Him even though you might think that you are honoring Him. Your heart does not belong to Him, or it is not completely His. Your heart is not engaged to do His will there first, in the place where no one else can see you, except God. And so there is a radical

discrepancy between what the lips are saying, and where the heart is going. It is a very spiritually dangerous place to be. It is easy to so deceive ourselves, that we are not aware that it is taking place. But thanks be to God, that He is faithful to show us if we need to be shown. These Pharisees and Scribes needed to be shown. They were totally self-deceived. Christ is saying to us here today that lip-service is not enough to please Him.

When we pay lip-service to God, it does not necessarily mean that we know Him. It does not mean that we are going to heaven just because our words in the sight of other men are convincing them that we are godly. He sees the matter as it truly is. He knows that it is entirely possible to live a life of trying to show other men that you are godly, when it is not really your heart's desire, as it should be. The tradition of lip-service was evidently very prevalent in the days of our Lord Jesus. I am sure that it is very prevalent now. The question is, who is it that you are trying to impress? Who is it that you are trying to serve? Are you trying to serve God who always sees everything in your heart at all times? Or are you simply a formalist; one who goes to church, puts in your time, thinking that other people are glad that you are there; thinking that it is enough to be outwardly moral, thinking that this will insure that you will go to heaven in the end, and yet your heart does not draw near to Him. Your heart, with God is the most important part of your being. That is where all the true worship takes place first. That is what all true service, and righteous works, and loving deeds flow from. A loving obedience to God's word, by faith in Jesus Christ, is the only way that God will be pleased with you. And the only way that your heart can be changed so that you will consistently draw near to Him is when you will pray and ask God for consistency in your faith, and progress in your godliness.

Without the grace of Christ, men will always try to put their own traditions in the place of true worship, and they will call it true worship. But it was for these kinds of sins that Jesus came, and it was for these kinds of sins that He died. Listen to 1 Peter 1: 17 – “And If you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” Do you see it, beloved? You needed, or perhaps you need now, to be redeemed from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers. That's what all church-going is, without the grace of Christ. And Christ had to die, and shed His precious blood to redeem you; to buy you back from your slavery to that kind of a hypocritical and God-denying life. You may have been very religious in the past, but you still need to be saved. That is the truth of the matter for all men. Religion and outward morality are not enough. You must have Christ.

And then the 3rd tradition that Jesus confronted these Pharisees and Scribes over was their rejecting the commandments of God in order to keep their tradition.

(Verses 9-13)

“He said to them, ‘All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.’” “For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and ‘He who curses father or mother let him be put to death.’” “But you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban’ – (that is, a gift to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down.’” “And many such things you do.” It was a tradition with the Pharisees and Scribes, I think, because of their love of money, to attempt to get around the clear statements of God's law in regard to their responsibilities to help and give money; to help support their parents when they got older, and when they couldn't provide for themselves as they used to. In this regard, Jesus says, they were rejecting the commandment of God, so that they might keep their tradition. In other words, it was more important for them to

look out for their own financial interests than it was to keep God's specific moral commandment to honor their parents. But Jesus said that to do this was "rejecting the commandment of God".

Now we need to see the greatness of these men's sins in light of what Jesus was saying. As I said to you earlier, they were upset and indignant that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands before they ate, and were thinking in their hearts that this was something worthy of death. But they had to be told by the Lord Jesus, here, that it was actually what they were doing, in breaking the moral law of God, in not keeping the 5th commandment, that really proved that they were worthy of death. And so Jesus says to them, "And many such things you do". It is very important then, that all of us understand that that there is a way of attempting to live the Christian life which will never be accepted by God and by our Lord Jesus Christ when the day of judgment comes. It is in trying to live it according to your own man-man traditions. It is by rationalizing away the commandments of God. It is by saying, "I will not have enough money for myself and my own pleasures and interests if I help out my aged parents." "So I will try to make it appear that I am still spiritually minded." "I will fulfill my responsibility to them by saying to them, 'Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban; that is, it is a gift to God.'" And then they will have to accept that answer because they know that a gift directly given to God is of more importance than anything which you would give to them. In this way, some think that they are free from any responsibility to provide for their aged parents.

Well, it may so in the eyes of some. But it will not be in God's eyes. That is what Jesus is saying. You should never believe that God is fooled by that kind of selfish reasoning; the kind of reasoning that might persuade other people looking on. A person may know how to do well for themselves financially, and yet break many of God's commandments in the process. They may look good in the eyes of men; but the question is, are they doing what pleases God? The application ought to be obvious to all of us. If we make up our own traditions of what obedience to God and responsibility to men consists of, we have rejected the real commandments of God. These Pharisees and Scribes were teaching the people in their synagogues not to do anything financially for their father or mother, so that the people would give more to them. And thus God's word was being made of no effect. If any person comes to us, and our words to them become more important than keeping the commandments of God, as they are plainly laid out in the Scriptures, then it is we ourselves who are in danger of judgment. Let us all examine our hearts and see where they go. Do they go to greed and covetousness, and withholding more than we should? Do they go to anything that would prevent us from honoring father and mother? Do we understand that it is not the outside of the cup and the dish that need to be washed but it is our hearts? Will we honor God with more than our lips by giving Him our hearts and our all? If we heed the words of Christ in this passage then we will. I pray and trust that this will be so for each one here today.