

How Does Human Tradition Undermine God's Word?

Mark Devotional #13

Mark 7:1-23

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ² they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) ⁵ And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" ⁶ And he 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;
⁷ in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."*

⁸ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."

⁹ And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' ¹¹ But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God) — ¹² then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

¹⁴ And he called the people to him again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him." ¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus, he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

- Mark 7:1-23, ESV

Jesus had many run-ins with the religious leaders of His day. It is rather troubling to stop and realize that the people who knew the Scriptures the best and who taught others the ways of God were the very people who most opposed Jesus and sought to have Him killed. Many people have taken this as a call to oppose "organized religion" of any kind. But the same Jesus who opposed the religious leaders of the Jewish people also established His church and appointed leaders for it.

So, what was the real problem? The heart of the conflict seems to come out clearly in today's passage: The religious leaders had elevated their traditions to the same status as Scripture, which practically meant that their religious traditions replaced and overruled Scripture. Whenever human traditions - even good and sincere ones - are given the same kind of emphasis and weight as God's word, problems arise and multiply.

Here are some of the consequences of the exaltation of human tradition we can see in today's passage:

1. People begin to judge others on the basis of their adherence to the tradition and not to God's word. Suddenly, people can be condemned because they don't wash their hands properly, according to the ceremonial procedures of the religious community.

2. People begin to shape their lives by traditions instead of by Scripture. The conception of what should and should not be done becomes guided by tradition, even when the tradition conflicts with Scripture.

3. In cases of conflict, one standard reigns supreme, and that almost always becomes the tradition. Jesus' harshest criticism was over the rejection of the commandment of God in favor of the tradition of men. This is really the test of our traditions: Are we willing to abandon them if a situation arises where they conflict with Scripture?

4. People lose sight of what sin is and what makes us acceptable or unacceptable before God. In this case, dietary laws replaced righteous speech as the standard for being "clean" or "unclean." In other cases, we can begin to think that the type of clothing we wear, the way we style our hair, the kind of worship service we have, etc. all determine whether we are acceptable to God or not. In this, we lose sight of the definition of sin and the way of salvation.

The problem with human beings is that we are very prone to traditionalism. But how can we avoid it? Simply, we must commit to the Bible as the standard and to holding each other accountable to being Biblical in all that we teach and practice. Together, standing on God's word, we can stand against the encroaching temptation of traditionalism.