

20. His Lesson on Tradition

Traditions. Everyone has traditions, practices or beliefs which are passed from one generation to another, or over a long period of time. All groups of people have traditions. They are almost unavoidable, because it is very difficult to always vary the way one does things. And it is often better to use what we find already in place, what we received from those who came before us, instead of coming up with something new.

Traditions can be good or bad. But good or bad, they tend to exert a lot of power over us. It is hard to break old habits (whether we are speaking of an individual or a group). We come easily to respect traditions, to comply with them and at the same time to want to impose them on others.

This is true for people everywhere, whether they be animists, Christians, Muslims or without any particular religion. As we will see, it was true also for the Jews at the time of Jesus. The people considered their traditions to be a very good thing. They would say that the traditions formed a wall around the law, so that by observing the tradition, they could be sure of not violating the law of God. This attachment to tradition is shown in this text from Mark 7:

“Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. 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. Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, ‘Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?’” (Mark 7:1-5)

Notice that the washings spoken of in this passage had nothing to do with hygiene, but rather they were concerned with ceremonial purification. (One could associate these purification rituals with

the ablutions practiced by Muslims before their prayers.) These customs were not prescribed in the Law of Moses, but they had taken on great importance for the Jews. A rabbi who was imprisoned by the Romans chose to use his small ration of water to wash his hands instead of drinking, and he almost died of thirst, so zealous was he for the tradition concerning these ablutions. We can thus better understand why Jesus’ response to the question of the Pharisees must have shocked them.

TRADITION = COMMANDMENTS OF MEN

“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.” For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.’” (Mark 7:6,8)

Jesus obviously did not have the same respect as the Jews for their tradition, and he denied the authority of this tradition on men. He called on his listeners to make a clear distinction between the commandments of God and the commandments of men. He went so far as to say that if we claim to worship God but care more about what men have ordained than what God has ordained, then we are quite simply hypocrites. We honor God with our lips, but deep down we do not love Him. What we do is just for show.

But where is the harm in the observance of traditions? It is true that one can keep certain traditions without violating the will of God, but through the teachings of Jesus, we see at least three dangers in tradition:

1. We exalt tradition to the same level as the Word of God.
2. We burden men with loads that we have no right to force them to carry.
3. We end up being unable to observe some of God's commandments because of our traditions.

For the first danger, we have already seen that Jesus said clearly: Traditions are not commandments of God. To exalt them or treat them as such is an error, and it is hypocrisy. Let's move on to the second danger.

TRADITION = BURDEN THAT WE HAVE NO RIGHT TO IMPOSE

Here is the accusation that Jesus made in Luke 11:46 against those who taught the law: “Woe to you also, lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.” What sort of burden were they putting on people? We have already seen the case of ablutions before meals. Jesus taught clearly that these rules had nothing to do with a person's relationship with God. He said in Mark 7:18-21:

“Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?” And He said, ‘What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, [etc...].’”

The laws on the washing of hands and dishes were a burden that was not at all necessary.

Another clear example would be the ordinances that Jewish tradition had accumulated concerning the Sabbath, or day of rest. The commandment of God seemed very simple: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates” (Exodus 20:8-10). This commandment was to be a blessing for the Jews, but they had transformed it by their traditions.

The Jewish tradition had identified 39 categories of work that were forbidden on the Sabbath. Among these categories was the act of carrying a burden. Yet, for each category, there were numer-

ous rules. For example, one not supposed to carry food heavier than a dry fig; one could carry a sick man on his mat but one could not carry the mat alone, etc. The Pharisees debated even the question of whether or not one could move a chair or carry an infant on the Sabbath.

When Jesus healed people on Saturday, these guardians of tradition accused him of having violated the Sabbath. You can see how they made a simple day of rest meant to be a benefit to people into a difficult day to manage because of these many contradictions. And if you violated one of these human ordinances, they spoke as if you had violated the law of God itself. However, scripture had said, “Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar” (Proverbs 30:6).

In our own time, churches impose on people duties that the Bible has not taught anywhere. We could cite, for example, the celibacy of priests, the observation of Lent, contributions at each gathering, the ban on certain foods and many other practices. In Colossians 2:20-23 the apostle Paul warns of the danger of falling into the trap of submitting to obligations that are not from God:

“Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.”

But Jesus not warn us simply because tradition adds useless obligations to the Law. Very often the tradition of men annuls the commandments of God.

TRADITION = OBSTACLE TO OBEDIENCE

In our text in Mark 7, Jesus continues his reproach to the Pharisees in these terms:

“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." (Mark 7:9-13)

Jesus spoke here of a custom of the Jews of his time. According to this custom, a person could designate a part of his assets as an offering designated for the temple of God. One called these assets "corban." They were set apart, reserved for God. According to tradition, if an elderly parent in need of food or assistance came asking for help from his child, the child had the right to say to his father or mother, "That from which I would have helped you is corban. The part of my assets that I would have used for you is the part I have put aside for the temple. Therefore I have no duty to help you materially."

There is certainly nothing wrong with promising to make an offering to God. But giving to God does not free us from the duty to honor our parents by aiding them with their material needs. To honor God from our blessings is a duty. Honoring our parents from our blessings is also a duty. But the human tradition of corban annulled the divine commandment to honor one's parents.

The same sort of problem continues today concerning the traditions of men versus the commandments of God. We know, for example, that Jesus and his apostles taught the necessity of baptism. Jesus said before returning to Heaven, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of

the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Or again, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15,16). But there is no Biblical passage that teaches that only certain Christians have the right to baptize those who believe. The emphasis is placed on the faith and repentance of the person who receives baptism. Nothing is said on the subject of the qualifications of the person who plunges the new disciple in the water of baptism. However, the majority of churches—Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant—require that the baptism be administered only by a priest or recognized pastor. I have known of Protestant churches where people in rural areas have played an active role in their church for ten years, but they have not received baptism simply because the credentialed pastor has not come to their villages to set up baptismal courses and baptize the new people. The word of God says clearly that people must be baptized, but in order to respect the commandments of men, a church tradition, they do not baptize them. Thus men annul the commandment of God.

CONCLUSION

It is much easier, isn't it, to follow the crowd, to simply conform to tradition without checking to know if they are good or not, if they are according to the will of God or not? But Jesus said, "And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Mark 7:7). Therefore, we exhort you to be servants of God and not slaves of the traditions of men. Make the proper distinction, and obey what God has actually commanded men to do.