



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Upsetting the Customary

Mark 7.1-13

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What Shall We Do with Traditions?

In his study of undenominational Christianity, Monroe Hawley told how, as a child, he would visit the rural congregation where his parents obeyed the gospel and began to serve Christ.

What stands out most clearly in my memory is that we always knelt for prayer. . . . One of the elders sat in a stiff armchair in the front and presided. Another member would start a song from his seat. Not infrequently it would be a sister. There was no designated song leader and never did the one directing stand before the assembly. The chairman would ask for exhortations and various brethren, standing at their seats, would edify the church from a selected passage of scripture. This was called mutual edification. . . . When the Lord's supper was offered there were two silver plates for the bread and two silver cups. When the fruit of the vine was given, the presiding elder would first offer thanks, and then pour it into the cups from a tall silver decanter. Each member would then drink from one of the cups.¹

Suppose in your travels, you were to stop at that church to worship. (1) Would any of the practices Hawley mentioned bother you? Why or why not? (2) Your children or grandchildren are with you, have never seen a service like that, and ask about what they've seen. What are your answers and reasons for them?

Have you noticed how the subject of tradition animates people and initiates discussion?

1. Is tradition a good thing or a bad thing?
2. Are any modern church issues rooted in tradition? How so? How do we respond?

Based on observation and study, I propose two general conclusions about traditions.

1. Generally, traditions concern us because we don't want to dishonor God by disobeying his word. But, neither do we want to be obligated to things that don't originate with or are expected by God.
2. In the New Testament, traditions are not inherently good or bad. They are things handed down from one generation and received by the next. Some began with God and are required. Others began with people as expedient ways to do God's will. Whether those are handed down is a matter of human judgment, hopefully guided by godly wisdom.²

Our text teaches that we should consider how to manage traditions correctly. If we don't, they can lead us to focus on outward practice over inner purity and/or treat human ways as if they were divine commands.

Churchmen with a Concern

What happened?

1. Jesus' reputation has continued to grow. Consequently "the Pharisees and some of the scribes . . . had come down from Jerusalem" (Mark 7.1 NRSV).³
2. They "noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them" (v. 2). Mark explains that this had to do with "observing the tradition of the elders" (v. 3), not hygiene; he also says it was typical of the Pharisees (vv. 3-4).
3. They ask Jesus to defend the practice of his disciples (v. 5), expected in a setting where "people viewed a teacher as entirely responsible for the conduct of his disciples."⁴
4. Jesus responds by pointedly telling his questioners that they were like the people of Isaiah's day whose unfaithfulness led to Jerusalem's downfall (Isa 29.13 LXX) (vv. 6-7).
5. They were elevating human traditions over God's commands (vv. 8-9). For example, they set aside money to God ("Corban") which they would not permit to be used to provide for parents. Thus, they violated the fifth commandment and were liable to the penalty for speaking against their parents (vv. 10-12; Exod 20.12; 21.17; Lev 20.9).
6. By setting aside the money and no longer permitting it to be used for their parents, Jesus told them, "you [are] . . . thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this" (v. 13).

Why had this happened? They had established their traditions based on good motives.

1. They wanted Israel to be holy and knew the way to be holy was to obey his word and avoid contamination from the dominant pagan culture around them (Garland, 247).
2. To facilitate purity, they developed "a great mass of oral tradition" that in "about AD 200 was written down in the Mishnah. . . . An entire division . . . is devoted to the question of ceremonial purity . . ."⁵
3. "The goal was to 'build a fence' around the law to protect against its violation" (Strauss and Wessel, 799) with the goal of knowing specifically how to apply and obey the law of God.

What are the core issues in the controversy?

1. Mark tells us in v. 2 that the primary issue was defilement. Literally, the word means "common" or "unclean" (κοινός, *koinos*). The original sense referred to things "common" as opposed to what was "private" (ἴδιος, *idios*). *Koinos* and its verbal cognate κοινῶ; (*koinōō*) are repeated in vv. 5, 15, 18, 20, 23, making what is "common" or "unclean" the theme of the chapter (Strauss & Wessel, 801).
2. In the interest of purity, the Pharisees had taken Old Testament commands about ritualistic washings for priests before they offered sacrifices (Exod 30.19-21; 40.12, 30-32) "and applied them to themselves, not only with reference to sacrifices but also to all food" (Strauss & Wessel, 799). From vv. 3-4, it is evident that some of their concern was over contact with Gentiles or even nonobservant Jews in the marketplace.⁶
3. As explained in vv. 6-9, 13, Jesus exposed two dangers resulting from their zeal to put a fence around the law.
 - a. Like the unfaithful people of Isaiah's day, it is possible to focus on externals to such an extent that we lose sight of the inner purity God wants us to have (vv. 6-7).

- b. We can practice the customary to the point that it becomes more important to us than what God has actually commanded (vv. 8-9, 13).⁷

Principles and Pointers for Managing Traditions

From our text, we can discern three principles for managing traditions.⁸

1. Only what originates with God is divine (vv. 3, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13).
2. What originates with God is obligated; what originates with people is optional.
3. What originates with God is supreme and primary; what originates with people is secondary and subordinate.

With those principles in mind, we suggest four pointers for managing traditions.

1. Study God's word in its original setting closely enough to discern which practices are obligated and, perhaps more importantly, which are not.
 - a. For example, tradition language is used in regard to the Lord's supper (1 Cor 11.17-26), reinforcing the expectation that the church of every generation will hand down the teaching that the church is to remember and eat it.
 - b. But such definitive language regarding exactly when during the assembly it should be eaten is absent.⁹ In other words, there is no divine tradition regarding an order of service.
2. Pay attention to their history, and at times more recent history, to know how (and often why) ways of doing things developed.
 - a. Continuing with our example of the Lord's supper, since they met in homes, we can be virtually certain their seating arrangement for eating the supper was not what like most of us have experienced. A different seating arrangement and location may have also created a somewhat different atmosphere during the supper.
 - b. Where did our customary way of partaking originate? Can we be so sure it is the mandatory method some seem to think it is?
3. Remember Jesus' other concern in Mark 7: do not let the practice of or concern for external behaviors lead to the neglect of inner purity and motive.
4. Do not confuse your preferences with God's priorities. Doing so invariably leaves us susceptible to looking and sounding more like the critical Pharisees, the unruly Corinthians, or the judgmental believers in Rome (Rom 14) than the humble saints we are called to be. Our methods are just that, our methods. Others may prefer something different and still be honoring God.

A Call to Honor God

In Matthew 16.19 and 18.18, Jesus declared the standard that must govern all we believe and do, including our approach to traditions. We are expected to bind only where God has bound and loose only where God has loosed. May we always be committed to that goal. It begins with our determination to submit to God's wisdom and authority over our own.

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Notes

¹ Monroe E. Hawley, *Redigging the Wells: Seeking Undenominational Christianity* (Abilene, TX: Quality Publications, 1976), 157.

² I recommend a study of NT words and passages having to do with tradition, handing down, and receiving. The words are παράδοσις (*paradosis*), παραδίδωμι (*paradidōmi*), and παραλαμβάνω (*paralambanō*). Begin with the following passages: Mark 7.1-13 (= Matt 15.1-9); Luke 1.2; Acts 6.14; 16.4; 1 Cor 11.2, 23; 15.3; Gal 1.9, 14; Phil 4.9; Col 2.8; 1 Thess. 2.13; 4.1; 2 Thess 2.15; 3.6; 2 Pet 2.21; Jude 3.

³ I'm using the NRSV throughout this sermon.

⁴ David E. Garland, "Mark," *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 248.

⁵ Mark L. Strauss and Walter W. Wessel, "Mark," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9, rev., ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 801.

⁶ Whether they expected all Israelites to do the same is uncertain. In our text, they tried to apply the practice to Jesus' disciples, but that could have been "because of Jesus reputation as a religious leader" (Strauss & Wessel, 799).

⁷ The particular case Jesus cited shows how easily we can confuse and abuse priorities where God's commands are concerned. First, the fact that money had been designated "Corban" did not ensure it would actually be given to the temple. The son could still use it for himself. But, once it was so designated, it could not be used for his parents. So, his responsibility could be circumvented. Beyond that, the designation of "Corban" was essentially an oath which the law decreed was not to be broken (Num 30.2; Deut 23.21-23). "[T]he rabbis debated whether a *qorbān* oath could be broken if it conflicted with other commandments or produced hardships for others. In the case of the fifth commandment, the Mishnah seems to favor the release of the vow for the sake of the parents (*m. Ned.* 8:1-9:1). Jesus clearly knew of cases in which rabbis took a harder line and gave precedence to the oath" (Strauss & Wessel, 800-802).

⁸ I am indebted for the statement of these principles to John R. W. Stott, *Christ the Controversialist: A Study in Some Essentials of Evangelical Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 69-76.

⁹ I am assuming, but not elaborating in this sermon, the New Testament evidence that they ate it when they came together sometime on the first day of the week (Acts 20.7; 1 Cor. 11.17ff.).