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Mark 7:1-13  
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 22, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, Jesus chastises the pharisees, “You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In our day of germ-consciousness, we might be tempted to sympathize with the pharisees’ concerns that the disciples weren’t washing their hands. But, understand the context rightly: the pharisees weren’t worried about physical cleanliness; they were worried about ceremonial cleanliness. They were worried that the disciples were “spiritually defiled” because they were not following the ceremonial traditions of the elders.

Once we understand that, we realize how absurd the concern sounds... especially considering all that Jesus has just been doing and saying to prove that He is God among them in the flesh! – feeding 5000, walking on water, healing villages of people, and teaching that he – the incarnate, flesh-and-blood God, will give his people eternal life and raise them up on the last day. There’s what and who the sinner needs: Jesus, the Christ!

Yet, somehow, in the face of all of that, the pharisees say, “You need to wash your hands! Worry about ceremonial defilement!” These ceremonially tunnel-visioned pharisees are

worried about the flesh-and-blood defilement of the disciples of the flesh-and-blood God!

We might swiftly (and rightly) blast the absurdity of their ceremonial concerns of pharisaical tradition; and we might find it easy to point out how godless are other well-known customs for righteousness among some like eating only fish during Lent, indulgences, monastic vows that supposedly make one holy. And, notice, the traditions and ceremonies the pharisees idolized (and those others that the Papacy popularized) were not regarding a worship service; it was daily life stuff... daily life traditions and ceremonies that supposedly made them more righteous (in our day, we might say, “better Christians.”)

Then again, why are we sometimes tempted with similar hopes of self-righteousness, as if certain traditions and ceremonial ways make us worthy in the sight of God. Don't we sometimes wrestle with that when we, almost subconsciously, think that certain traditions must be kept if I am to be a Christian: the one who prays before the meal is 'more Christian' than the one who doesn't; and he who prays before meals *and* bed is 'more Christian' than the one who prays just before meals. Again, one who wears his Sunday best to church is 'more Christian' than the one who doesn't; and the one whose Sunday best is most formal is more the Christian than the one whose Sunday best is less formal. And again, one who serves on a Board/committee is 'more Christian' than one who doesn't, and one

who serves every year is 'more Christian' than the one who has never served.

Now, hear this rightly: we're not saying that traditional practices regarding prayer should be disregarded, or that coming before God in the dress of reverence isn't a good confession, or that serving in the Church's care isn't *very* beneficial for your fellow Christian. But when we make these good customs into commandments and laws of righteousness, we have misused them and have replaced Christ's righteousness with hopes of our own.

Certainly, that could happen within the customs of worship: one hymnal is more righteous than another; making the sign of the cross is more righteous than not; kneeling before God is more righteous than standing before God. Going to the 8:00 service is more righteous than going to 10:30. And, in all of these cases, the sinful heart could put the shoe on the other foot, and argue, "No, just the opposite is more righteous!"

Now, none of us hearing this self-righteousness would be willing to stand up and defend it. No one would say, "Yes, this is more important for righteousness' sake than is the flesh-and-blood Messiah with whom the disciples ate (and with/of whom we eat)!" No one would say that!

And yet, in our hearts and minds, sometimes we must admit that we hold fast to traditions in a way that seeks to justify, that

seeks to prove self-worth, in a way that is deserving of Jesus' words to the pharisees: "Well did Isaiah say of you *hypocrites*."

Those are tough words. Why would Jesus be so direct over something that perhaps could even be described as a point of sinful *weakness* and not so much a point of stubborn defiance?

The answer comes when he says to them, right after quoting Isaiah (which we'll come back to), he says, "You *leave* the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." That word for "leave" is ἀφέντες. It's the same word the Greek uses elsewhere for the word "forgive." Notice what Jesus is saying: You leave behind – you try to forgive yourself – the commandments of God (try to explain away why we don't need to repent before the commandments of God) by holding fast to traditions of men.

In other words, we subconsciously recognize that we need a clear conscience before God – that's what forgiveness is about, isn't it?, a declaration of "not guilty" that gives us a clear conscience to stand before God? We recognize we need that clear conscience, but that the Law of God is too holy for us... that, if we attempt to measure ourselves against the holy Law, there is no way we can be found righteous. So, what do we do? We leave the commandments behind and, so to speak, "forgive ourselves *those* commandments" by making man-made traditions that we are more able to keep. We think we can substitute the arbitrary holiness of man for the everlasting holiness of God. And then, when we've defined these

traditions as keepable commandments, not only do we grant ourselves a clear conscience, but we start to point out others who are undefiled according to the tradition!

That's exactly how the pharisees worked, isn't it? They left behind God's commandments, Jesus says, and created their own standards of righteousness. In a sense, they *redefined* righteousness.

Interestingly, Mark's gospel also points out how they claimed righteousness in ways whose terminology *sounds* faithful (the terminology *reminds* us of faithfulness), but those ways actually work to replace the faith with self-righteousness: Mark points out that they would wash cups, pots, vessels, dining couches... and the word for "wash" there is "βαπτίζω" – baptize! Notice: they do believe in a *ceremonial* baptism, a ritual baptism... but not Christ's baptism! The *ceremonial* baptism somehow made them clean, but they have no use for Christ's promises to make them clean in the heavenly washing of water and the Word. Sadly, there are church bodies today whose theology shares the pharisees' methods – who exchange the promises of Christ's baptism for the forgiveness of sins with a redefined baptism... a "believer's baptism" that no longer cherishes Christ's saving waters, but only the waters of ceremonial righteousness, that the believer might prove he is not defiled. Why would we want to hold to such traditions of men and *their* form of cleanliness, when we have the promises of divine washing made by the flesh-and-blood Christ?

You see, then, the problems with such hope in traditions. Go back to Jesus' citation of Isaiah: "The people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me; teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

Yes, the traditions of men become (for our sinful hearts and self-righteous hopes) *commandments* of men... and those man-made commandments are taught as doctrines and replace the pure heavenly doctrine of Christ Jesus. Such leads to a hollow honoring with lips, while the heart seeks its own righteousness, its own self-justification through its newly-defined holiness.

And, here's the "nail in the coffin" in Jesus comments: He reminds the pharisees that their arbitrary rituals actually have replaced Moses' giving of God's commandments: Jesus points out how they put aside and explain away the Fourth Commandment by clearing their conscience with their supposedly super-pious offerings... as if, Jesus explains, they can reject the care and needs of their own parents by saying that their treasures are reserved (in their super-righteousness) as "Corban" for God. "Corban" was the Hebrew word used throughout the Old Testament to refer to all kinds of offerings, both bloodless (thank-offerings) *and* bloody sacrificial offerings! And Jesus shows the hypocrisy of the pharisees, that they would misuse the offering as a way of overlooking their responsibility to care for their neighbor in need, even their own parents! "Oh yes," their own hearts said to themselves, "look how I will do for God

something holy and far above that ‘lesser stuff’ of love for neighbor.” And, by doing so, they declare their consciences clean; they’ve saved themselves by their offering!

In other words, Jesus uses this example to hint to the pharisees that, yes, Moses may have been instructed to save the people from their sins by putting a bronze serpent on a standard to teach them Christ’s bloody sacrifice, but they have decided replacement sacrifices, new traditions, new standards can be raised up for their own hypocritical righteousness.

Now, even as Jesus condemns such misguided hypocrisy, he also includes a thinly-veiled reference to the true gospel and foundation of salvation. Go back to his citation of Isaiah and notice how many times he says the word “me”:

“The people honor *me* with their lips, but their heart is far from *me*; in vain do they worship *me*...”

Notice that, that by using this quote of Isaiah, Jesus is subtly pointing to himself (right there in front of them the whole time) in not-so-veiled reference reminding them that *He* is the one they can honor; *He* is the one to whom their hearts can draw near in confidence; *He* is the one who can be worshiped – not in vain hypocritical self-righteousness – but he can be worshiped by all whose hearts are broken, who despair of themselves, who repent of their desire to leave behind the holy commandments of God in favor of their own holy will. All who repent of that, all who despair of themselves, they

may all flee to Jesus' righteous sacrifice... and their hope will not be put to shame. Hand-washing and many other such traditions cannot save the sinner, but Jesus can and does.

Indeed, everything can point to this Jesus and have the greatest confidence in his saving work. By his sacrificial death, we are guiltless. By his baptismal washing, we are no longer defiled, but clean. By his flesh and blood, our flesh and blood abides with him and he with us, and he will raise us up on the last day. By his righteousness, we need not be hypocrites claiming no need for forgiveness, but may have a free and clear conscience before God, who forgives us and loves us "for the sake of Jesus Christ."

And that's why every one of the true faith's traditions points to Jesus. You see, it's not that traditions are bad. It's that man's traditions used for self-righteousness point hearts away from our God-given Christ. Whether it be baptismal regeneration being replaced with "ceremonial believer's baptism." Whether it be good and salutary traditions replaced with Rome's capital-t Tradition – as if their theologians' words are, in the weigh-scale of truth, equal to God's Word in Christ Jesus... such use of tradition is sinful and in vain.

But we can be content in all those traditions that point us right to Jesus. Every ritual and practice of worship (if it is not to be in vain) ought glory in pointing to Jesus. In fact, *proper* tradition points us to and focuses us on: the Word and Sacrament, for they are God's



own means that actually give us Jesus, the Holy One of God. And where customs not only point to Jesus at a distance, but point us to the very tools of God (Word and Sacrament) that actually *give* us Jesus... *then*, in that case, traditions are good and useful, *teaching* tools that pass down the faith as delivered from one generation to the next. In fact, Paul says to the Corinthians, “I commend you because you... maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.” To the Colossians, Paul warns against those pharisaical type traditions (that hijack and replace that good and useful word) when he says, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition... and not according to Christ.” Notice, how man-centered traditions seek to leave behind and replace Christ-centered teaching and the traditions such teaching employs... those Christ-centered traditions in which Paul encourages the Thessalonians, urging, “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.”

Our Lutheran Confessions make this distinction between hypocritical-self-justifying efforts and good *teaching* customs, when our Confessions say,

*“All ... traditions instituted by men for the purpose of propitiating (appeasing) God and earning grace are contrary to the Gospel and ... faith in Christ.” (AC XV) However, the Confessions continue, “ceremonies should be retained to teach people”... yes, to point people to Christ.*

Indeed, we can embrace all the Gospel-pointing traditions of the church as every little detail teaches us and points us to Jesus. For where our consciences are clean because of him, where hearts are brought by Word and Sacrament near to him, where we dwell and dine with him, we are not defiled and we may disregard the critiques of the self-righteous. For we have the same Jesus who fed the 5000, Jesus who walked on water, Jesus who healed villages, Jesus who pointed to himself as the living bread from heaven... indeed, we have the Jesus who did all *that* for the very purpose that we might recognize Him as the Christ and thus, glory in his cross and his saving work... and that, dependent on his Word, gifted with his Sacraments, and cherishing the traditions that teach us and point to him, we may say, "Lord, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells."

God's glory dwells here, not because of man-centered traditions, nor because of man-made commandments or man-declared cleanliness. God's glory dwells here because Christ Jesus is here... with his pure doctrines, with his perfect righteousness, with his heavenly gifts that give us a clean conscience for faith in God and fervent love for our neighbor.

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

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