

August 24, 2024
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Mark 7:1-13 (Ephesians 5:22-33)

THE TRADITIONS OF MAN CLEAN THE OUTSIDE BUT ONLY JESUS CAN CLEANSE THE HEART.

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

It's difficult to imagine the emotional stress that Jesus faced every day during His earthly ministry. He was a figurative pinball bouncing between those who desired to be near Him and those who hated Him. Great crowds followed Him to hear His teaching. Great crowds followed, hoping to be fed with free bread. Great crowds followed bringing to Him the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and demon possessed, to be healed. And just when He gets a break from the flocks of sheep in need of a shepherd, He's confronted by His enemies – the Jewish religious leaders who are conspiring to destroy Him. (cf: Mark 3:6)

In our Gospel text this morning, Jesus has left the crowds and some of the Pharisees and scribes have come from Jerusalem and gather around Him. They have not come to be taught by the Word become flesh, but to provoke and argue with Him, hoping to catch Him saying or doing something for which they could arrest Him.

The religious leaders were the keepers of God's Law. God had originally given Moses 613 various moral, civil, and ceremonial laws for His people to obey. But as Jewish history continued, more laws were added as specific historical events occurred – and – many traditions and commandments of men were added to safeguard the Law. These traditions and commandments were added to create a “fence” or a “hedge” of sorts around God's Law to protect fellow Jews from accidentally stumbling and breaking God's Law. In theory, if you could keep the traditions of men, then you were certain that you had not transgressed God's Law.

Our government has instituted many laws, teachings of man, to create a “fence” or a “hedge” of sorts to protect you. While you are skeptical of the government, you should be more concerned about the false gospel teachers who take Scripture out of context. They teach doctrines of man, twisting Scripture to fit into whatever narrative they wish. Some quote what they say are Bible passages... except they cannot be found in the Bible. They want you to believe they honor God. And they very well may honor God with their lips – but their hearts are far from Him.

Whenever Scripture is used out of context or when passages are quoted but not found in the Bible, sound Christian doctrine is twisted and morphed into dangerous eternal life-threatening heresy. Just as earthly governments and false teachers have proven, it's easy to create laws and

traditions, but human laws and traditions *do not* create faith and change hearts. God alone creates new and clean hearts.

In our text, when the religious leaders notice that some of Jesus disciples ate with unwashed hands, they take issue with Jesus, saying:

“Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” (Mark 7:5)

Of course clean hands are important. With Covid not that far in the rear-view mirror, I still use lots of hand sanitizer and liberally wash my hands. Employers have strict policies about hand washing. Yet, who’s to say when your hands are truly and thoroughly clean? Scientists, doctors, parents, or employers? But in our text, neither the Pharisees nor Jesus are concerned about germs and hygiene. As a matter of fact, handwashing for hygiene purposes is relatively new in society. Doctors didn’t routinely wash their hands until the middle of the 1800s. Prior to that, handwashing was not medical common sense. It was a religious ritual. (cf: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9632745/>)

When God commanded religious washings, He knew all about germs and hygiene. But His command was not for the common people but for the Levitical priests. (cf: Exodus 30:17–21; Leviticus 22:4-7) It was not in a concern for germs and hygiene but a ceremonial law for priests to demonstrate religious purity, trusting in God, and worshipping Him alone. It was to set the Jewish people apart from the rest of mankind. But the scribes and Pharisees were just like those today who take Scripture out of context, quoting passages that don’t exist, all for the sake of their own agenda and heretical teaching.

They’d taken God’s Law and built their own traditions around it in an effort to protect the people from accidentally breaking God’s Law. And in doing so the traditions of the Elders handed down through the generations, in their opinion, trumped God’s Law as handed down on Mt Sinai and as written upon the hearts of men. It was legalism. It was all about going through the proper motions, following the exact observance of the ritual. Renouncing their hypocrisy, Jesus says:

“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.’” (Mark 7:5–7)

The Pharisees followed a strict adherence to all the laws and traditions. They were legalists that taught that the way to earn God’s favor and eternal life was by following their rules... believing that obeying their rules was equivalent to obeying God. Today, we call it ***“giving lip service.”*** It’s talking the talk of being faithful to God’s commandments – but not walking the walk. It’s honoring God with the lips, but hearts are far away. It’s like when you come upon someone whom you know that doesn’t particularly care for you – but they pat you on the back and shake your hand – pretending to be your best friend. It’s sort of like Judas betraying Jesus with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane. (Mark 14:45)

Lip service to God is standard operating procedure for the sinful man. You and I take Bible passages out of context or distort passages in an attempt to justify our fleshly wants and desires. You say you’re against divorce and immoral sexual relationships – until it hits close to home and

it's someone you know and care about. Then your lips twist Scripture and concoct all sorts of doctrines of man to wallpaper over and hide the guilt of your sin and theirs. Your lips proclaim that abortion is murder... until an unplanned pregnancy risks embarrassing you, or gets in the way of your life-plans. Euthanasia? Physician assisted suicide? Of course, God's Word says it's wrong – and you believe it – until it's you or someone you love suffering and you desire that your will be done rather than God's will.

Most Christians say they believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. But when asked if Baptism grants salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit... or if infant Baptism is valid, they back pedal. They say, *“That's not what those passages mean.”* I said last week that, as Lutheran Christians, we believe that when Jesus said, “this is my body” and “this is my blood,” He is physically present in, with, and under the bread and wine. But many say Jesus was using figurative language. It takes a lot of verbal gymnastics to explain away Jesus Word as recorded in Holy Scripture. It's holding on to the traditions of a denomination... the traditions of men... instead of holding fast to the inspired and inerrant Word of God.

I know what you're thinking: [sarcasm on →] *“But Pastor, who's to say which interpretation is correct when understanding what Scripture says? How do you know the Lutherans are right? Aren't you just following the Lutheran tradition.”* [← sarcasm off] Jesus scolded the Pharisees for teaching the commandment of men. And even today, nothing should be believed, taught, and confessed in church that is not grounded in Scripture. Yes, we trust our Lutheran Confessional writings because they are a correct exposition of Holy Scripture. And until the testimony of Scripture proves them wrong, we will continue to stand first on Holy Scripture and then on our confessions.

During the Reformation Luther stressed ***Scripture alone***, as he protested against the false doctrines taught by the Church of Rome. Rome had become enslaved to the traditions of man – and that slavery to tradition remains today: praying to the saints, worshipping the Virgin Mary, and paying hard earned dollars to get loved ones out of purgatory. But none of those traditions are found in Scripture.

We point to Scripture alone as recorded by the prophets and apostles because Scripture does not change. (cf: Isaiah 40:8) What is recorded in the Holy Bible is the divinely inspired and inerrant Word of God. We believe what it says. Period! And when Scripture appears to contradict human reason, we throw human reason on the back burner and by faith, allow the passage to remain in tension... meaning, although it's doesn't sound consistent with human reason – God said it – so we must believe what it says. The Christian is bound by the Scriptures. The Christian conscience is captive to the Word of God. (cf: LW 32. 112)

The traditions of man very well may give a good impression on the outside. You and I might look as clean as clean can be; however, aside from Christ Jesus, our lips flow with sewer water and our hearts are rotting flesh. In next week's Gospel lesson Jesus continues this dialog with the scribes and Pharisees, explaining that it's not what's on the outside that makes us unclean, but what's on the inside.

Today, we continue to emphasize: Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone. God doesn't make Himself known to you through the traditions and laws of man – but through the inspired and inerrant Word of God. His Word testifies that He sent His holy, innocent Son to take on human flesh and become your Substitute and Substitute for all mankind.

Jesus, as Substitute, fulfilled all requirements of the civil, ceremonial, and moral Law in your place. This is called His active obedience. In His passive obedience, He endured God's entire wrath against sin, paying the wages of your sin in His suffering and death – which you and I deserved. It's not your work of fulfilling the traditions and man. It's by God's abundant grace alone for the sake of Jesus work of salvation on your behalf.

God the Father accepted Jesus' work of salvation, raising Him from the dead and for Jesus' sake alone, He pours out His boundless grace and forgiveness of sins, to you and all who believe. He forgives your sin of twisting and distorting Scripture an attempt to justify your fleshly wants and desires.

Jesus did all the work for you and for His one holy Christian Church, sanctifying you and cleansing you – not on the outside – but a spiritual cleansing of the heart in the holy waters of Baptism, clothing you with His righteousness so that you might be holy and blameless in His sight. (cf: Ephesians 5:25–27)

You might think this sounds too easy. You might think this doesn't stand up to reason. You're right! It doesn't stand to reason. So, we let the tension remain. You don't believe because it sounds reasonable. You believe because God's Word says so. You have His promise. You receive it by faith. Faith alone.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, there are many false teachers proclaiming phony doctrines and traditions of man. Just as earthly governments and false teachers have proven, it's easy to create laws and traditions, but human laws and traditions **do not** create faith and change hearts. God alone creates new and clean hearts. It is only for the sake of Jesus, your Substitute, that you're reconciled with the Father, and presented with a clean heart and a right spirit – holy and blameless in His sight. For the sake of Jesus, you're a new creation.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.