

Worthless Worship

Mark 7:1-13

We have together been studying one individual for near half a year now—Jesus the Galilean, the dread of demons, the friend of sinners.

There are some who content themselves to know of Jesus by hearsay and by rumor. They mine their ore from the rocks of public opinion, smelt together the rumors about this man that they like best, and forge an idol Jesus, like a bronze calf hot from the fire of imagination. They keep their idol on the mantelpiece, part of their home, but a small and neglected part. I cannot blame them for their neglect—if Jesus was as bland and boring as the idol they have made him to be, I would not think of him either.

But we are not of that number who can rest in a rumor about Jesus. We have heard a still, small voice, a wild suggestion whispered in a quiet hour, this: “What if Jesus is more than we’ve ever imagined him to be?”

What if we have thought him embers, when he was really fire? What if, like one man has written, God does not find our desires too strong, but too weak, and we, like children, are content with the mudpies of a worldly life only because we do not know the meaning of a vacation at the beach, of a Jesus broad enough to carry the weight of all our passions, and broader still?

If you wish Faith Bible Church to be a boring collection of religious individuals, then be content with the knowledge of Jesus that you have now. Think to yourself, “I know Jesus enough. I have heard the sermons and the Sunday schools, I have watched the Easter specials on T.V.” And we can meet each week, like good and proper churches do, and still have time for those higher pursuits of family and food and career and video games and Facebook and March Madness.

But if we are of those whose hearts shift uncomfortably at the thought of a mediocre, gray, and wasted life, there is only one path for us to walk. Let us do this. Let us resolve to know Jesus *as he is*. The whole world will raise its hand to object, will press against you with its manifold temptations, will argue that there is no more of Jesus to know, that you are wasting your time. It will even offer you religious alternatives to Jesus, like those found in most churches. “Well, world,”

is our reply, “if you want to be a boring mass of useless nothingness, have at it! But do not hinder us. We want to see Jesus.”

This resolve, growing up from weak and trembling, but desperate, soil, will not be without its reward. We will see Jesus. And our neighbors may drive down Oak Hill, see this church ablaze, and come to watch us burn; some may say, “Those fools! They’ll burn themselves out with their zeal!” and others, “surely God is in this place!” But no one will ever be able to say, “That is a nice and proper church.” Oh, may God grant us to know Jesus as he is.

And may he grant us to make a start at it this morning.

So, we pass by all rumors about Jesus and come to Jesus himself in the Scriptures, in the book of Mark. We are in the seventh chapter, and we find the sixth encounter Jesus has in this book with the religious leaders of his day. We find a man, Jesus, who knows the Father, who knows God directly; and contrasted with this, we find nice and proper religious people who are content to know of God only by hearsay and human tradition. Jesus knows his Father, unlike the most religious men around him; may we know Jesus, even if it be unlike anyone else.

MARK 7:1-13

First, this morning, we will consider what it is to know God and his will by rumor only, through the traditions of men. And secondly, we will consider how such a knowledge of God is empty.

The religious and their traditions (vv. 1-5)

First, then, let us consider the religious and their traditional knowledge of God.

An unexpected enmity

Every age and area has its religious people. Jesus lived in Israel two millennia ago, and so he encountered, in verse 1, “The Pharisees and some of the scribes.”

Who were these? Well, the scribes and the Pharisees are interrelated groups—someone could be a scribe of the Pharisees, for example. Both groups were teachers. In Matthew 23, Jesus says, “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses.” Moses was the man through whom God gave Israel his commandments, found in the first five books of the Bible. The scribes and Pharisees sat in Moses’

seat—that is, they claimed to be teachers of the Torah, of the commandments of God given through Moses. And those in our text are “from Jerusalem,” the heart of Judaism and Jewish thought. These are serious teachers of the Law

We might suppose from this that Jesus, that faithful Jew, obedient to all the commands of God, would have loved and been loved by both of these parties. Jesus thought very highly of Moses, the man of God, and Moses had prophesied favorably of the coming of Jesus. So, we conclude, those who sit in Moses’ seat must surely love this Jesus.

But we are surprised when we begin to read Mark. Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees are not friends, but strident opponents. For their part, the Pharisees, in the second chapter of Mark, object to Jesus’ dining with tax collectors and sinners. Later in that chapter they object to Jesus’ disciples picking heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath. By chapter three, the Pharisees so much object that they are drawing up plans to kill Jesus.

The scribes, on their part, object to Jesus forgiving the sins of the paralytic in chapter two, and object to his exorcisms in chapter three, claiming that he was empowered by the devil himself. So one group wants to kill him, and the other says he’s in league with the devil. As you can see, these teachers are not fond of Jesus.

How do we account for this unexpected tension? Why would two sets of people, Jesus and these religious teachers, who claim to love the same Law and the same God, not love each other? Common interests tend to blossom into friendships and alliances and marriages. What is wrong in this present case?

There is only one answer: someone is not telling the truth. Someone who claims to love God and his Law does not.

The traditions of men

This we begin to see in the religious leaders’ latest objection to Jesus, beginning in verse 2: “[they] had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk

according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?”

Let us imagine that you are eating at the house of a modern Orthodox Jew—I do not know if this is permissible, but let us imagine. As you sit to eat, you notice that he first goes to his sink. He lifts a cup with two handles, fills it with water, and pours it twice over his left hand, then twice over his right. Holding his wet hands up, he recites the Hebrew of this line:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us concerning the washing of the hands.

When he comes to sit, you ask, “Where in your Scripture has God commanded you concerning the washing of the hands?” This would be a hard question, and for this reason: nowhere in the Law of Moses does God command this kind of washing of hands before eating. We, in Christ, are not under the Old covenant Laws, but those who consider themselves to be, like modern Jews, or like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day, could not show you where in the Law this washing of the hands was commanded. In fact, the only washing of the hands commanded in the whole Law was for the priests.

God never commanded it. Nor did he command that one wash when returning from the market place, nor did he command the washings of cups and pitchers and copper pots as the Jews practiced it.

So we press our Jewish friend further: “Where did this practice come from?” And the answer, unexciting as it is, must be this: some guy made it up. That’s what the “tradition of the elders” means. It was invented in time past by a person. The religious leaders call it “the tradition of the elders,” but Jesus will call it “the tradition of men” and “your tradition.”

Now we begin to see a difference between Jesus and the religious leaders. Their lips were no different—both sang the praises of the Almighty Jehovah, and both claimed an honest delight in his laws. But press them further, and we find that one, Jesus, will not settle for less than knowing God in truth, while the other is content to know God and his laws by hearsay, through the traditions of the elders.

Behind the traditions (vv. 6-13)

Alright, we have established who these scribes and Pharisees are, and we begin to see that they know and serve God through the traditions of the elders.

And you, in anticipation of where our discussion leads us, may object, “But what is the problem with traditions? Everyone has traditions. You worship here in ways the Bible does not directly command—you use a guitar and a piano in public worship, for example, which is nowhere commanded in Scripture. You pray with hands folded and eyes closed—why? Certainly these are human traditions passed down to you.”

Ulterior motives

You are right. There is nothing wrong with human traditions. But there can be something very wrong *behind* the traditions. Note Jesus’ reply to his opponents in verses 6 and following:

And He said to them, “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written:

‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,
BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.

‘BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME,
TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.’

Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.”

Finally we find why Jesus and the religious leaders may speak alike, honoring God with their lips, yet be so markedly different from each other. One of the two parties are hypocrites—their lips draw near to God, but their hearts are far away.

On the one hand, here is Jesus, drawing near to God with his heart, loving him in truth. In the public square his lips say, “I love the Father and do exactly as he has commanded me,” and his heart nods its head in full agreement. And when he turns aside to be alone, he kneels to pray and basks in the presence of his Father.

On the other hand, here are the scribes and Pharisees, standing on the corner of the busy street and saying, “God, I love you,” and, “Oh, how I love your Law!” Yet their pale hearts are not nodding yes, but nodding off to sleep. The distance between what they say and who they truly are is a hypocrite’s mile. When they are alone, prayer is the last activity they would like to do.

Note carefully this characteristic of theirs, for it is the poison in a million veins today, and is the reason behind their many traditions.

If you should ignore for a moment the false babblings of a Pharisee, and instead reach and rip in half the deceitful veil over his heart, this is what you would find. Pressed up next to his heart, close as it can be, is the love of money. And on the heart's other side, leaning just as strongly against it, you would find the love of man's praise. And that is all you would find.

So, with that new perspective, stitch up the veil and consider again the words and activities of this Pharisee. Look, he is frequent in prayers in the temple, and on the streets. Why? Those who love God do this, right? Yes—but so do those who love men's praise. See again, he is giving to the poor. Yes, and sounding his trumpet too. He practices his righteousness before men to be noticed by them, and he has his reward in full.

Or here, consider the example which Jesus gives, this example of Corban. A young Jewish man has parents who are in need. But the Pharisees have handed down this tradition of Corban, so that the young man can say to his parents, "I'm sorry, but whatever I have that might help you in your old age, I have promised to give to God instead. When I die, this money or these goods will be deeded over to the temple treasury, so I cannot give them to you. They are Corban, I have sworn it, and I must not break my vow."

"Wow," we are supposed to think, "this man swears to his own hurt and does not change. These Pharisees so highly regard oaths made to God, the solemnity and sanctity of these reverent utterances, that they will not allow them to be undone even for one's own parents!" Here is what the Pharisaical lip would assert, "It is all for God, whom we love."

Hypocrites! It was not for no reason that the temple treasury was called the "Corbanas." You hypocrites know that the dedicated goods will end up there, and some of you being priests, or otherwise connected to the temple perhaps, expect that once the Corban is in the Corbanas, it is as good as in your greedy pockets! You honor God with your lips, but your heart is sunken in golden wishes.

So we see that the traditions were simply a way of *using* the Scriptures to meet their evil desires. If I want your Corban to end up in my Corbanas, but the Law says that you must honor your parents by giving it to them instead, what can I do? I can make a tradition, claim that it

will keep you within God's will, but then reverse its role and use it to keep you outside of God's will.

The nature of the traditions

Now before we move on, let's consider three final things concerning these traditions, three things which they have in common with the traditions of all traditional religions today.

First, the traditions were heavy. A collection of Jewish tradition, known as the Talmud, compiled not long after the time of our text, contains, in standard print, over six thousand pages of detailed, man-made regulations. What is the reason for these?

The Jews claimed that this "Oral Torah" began at Sinai, and was passed down, through the "elders," to serve as a fence around the Law. God has commanded something simple, but by adding many detailed regulations, many that go beyond the Law itself, we can make absolutely sure that we do not violate what God has commanded. What they really did was lay a burden of laws upon men's shoulders, and suck the joy and vitality out of God's service.

Secondly, these traditions were regarded as divine, as God-sanctioned. The Pharisees passed on their very human traditions *as if* they were the very ordinances of God. Don't they care that this slanders the name of God by attributing to him what he has never spoken? No, they don't care. What they do care about is this: if people think the traditions to be Law, then the people are more likely to keep the traditions. It's all a power play, and it's all intended to win the Pharisees and scribes their praise and their money.

Thirdly, the traditions required, as do all such traditions today, no love for God. Here is the draw of a religion of human traditions: the traditions may all be completed without any true love for God. It is easy to worship in Jerusalem, if going to Jerusalem is all that is required; it is equally easy to worship on Mt. Gerazim, if we must simply trek up to that mountain. But God is looking for worshippers who will worship him in spirit and in truth, not in Jerusalem or on Mt. Gerazim.

This is the heart of the whole Law, that our hearts would be near to God. But those who have not been born again and do not have new hearts cannot do this, so they settle for human traditions that may be accomplished without any love for God whatsoever.

Conclusion

As I have spoken, undoubtedly you have made the application of this text for us. It is so relevant that I hardly need mention its relevance.

Consider, for example, this: how many persons today have a religion learned by rote? Roman Catholicism is almost nothing except human traditions, and those rare few who do have hearts near to God within the Catholic Church must have their focus blurred and their zeal dampened by the decrees of human councils and creeds. It was for freedom that Christ set us free, that we might through love serve one another—but you must attend to your rosaries and masses and repetitious prayers. And it is very easy to be a happy Catholic without really loving God or longing after our Lord Jesus Christ; the traditions abrogate the need for these weightier matters of love.

But this danger is present everywhere, in true churches too. You may frequent this house of worship and sit often under the precious word of God, preached from this pulpit. You may have learned by rote the many activities which make one a good Christian in our cultural context. Here you are, on a Sunday morning—doesn't that count for something? God's praises were on your lips only twenty or thirty minutes ago. But here is the only question Jesus cares about: where is your heart?

See here, this Jesus, the Lamb of God sent to absorb the sins of the world in his own body on Calvary. Is your heart with him? All the efforts you exert, all the traditions of our age with which you are so familiar, forget every one of them for a moment and gaze directly at this single object, Jesus of Nazareth. Think on this question: is your heart with him?

Can you this morning behold the man upon the cross, my sin upon his shoulders, posted to splintering beams by crude Roman iron, and leave here content that you know enough about him already. Can you walk past the cross to this side to perform your religious rituals, then cross under his dripping feet so that you may indulge your heart in what really interests it this week, and then cross back next Sunday, never looking up at the very spirit of all God's communication to us? Will you miss Jesus because you are too preoccupied pretending to serve him?

The text today includes hard words from Jesus, words that rend to the very heart, so I have tried to match mine to his. But let me conclude by urging you from another angle.

Does the Jesus whom you believe in really satisfy you? Perhaps you have only known him through hearsay and tradition and fuzzy notions, and you have never thought there was great reason to devote more than a Sunday morning to him. My news for you is larger and better than you, in your happiest moments, could ever have conceived.

And it is this: Jesus is more than any of us, in our best thoughts, have ever reckoned him to be, more than our own traditions and musings have suggested to us. Rumors can only understate him. And you needn't believe me in this matter, for he is willing to prove it.

Pull your heart away from the mudpies it enjoys, be done with the alternative motives of love for money, love for praise, of the worldly delights which you hope to bring you the greatest happiness. They have not satisfied you, I am certain. And with a humble expectancy, lift your heart up to Jesus, let your inside finally match your outside, your lips match your motives. Do not do this tomorrow, but today—and see what happens.

You whose hearts already are with God—yes, we have many helpful traditions, like the manner in which we pray. But let us ever remember that the goal of our instruction is love for Jesus, from a pure heart, and any tradition or notion which keeps us from our goal must be modified or discarded.

Keep the written gospels often in your eyes, always on your heart, and the Jesus you find there, let him every day replace the traces of your idol Jesus with himself. And we will find this true Jesus to be better, more real and satisfying and exciting, than all we have traditionally thought about him.