TRADITION AND THE WORD OF GOD

Mark 7:1-23

Key Verse: 7:8

"You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

This passage is about the Pharisees who came from Jerusalem to find a basis for a charge against Jesus. It was be­cause they had been alarmed by Jesus' popu­larity and had already determined to kill Je­sus (Jn 5:18). Jesus is the Messiah for whom his people had been wait­ing a long time. But when the Mes­siah came his people did not accept him (Jn 1:11). In this pas­sage we learn that human tradi­tion is good, but it must be correct­ed by the living word of God whenever it is necessary. Other­wise, tradi­tion cor­rupts peo­ple and it makes peo­ple habitual like an ani­mal. Most of all, we learn that the word of God is the old, old story, but it is appli­cable to all generations.

I. The tradition of the Jews (1-8)

**First,** the Pharisees and traditions (1-5). The kingdoms of Israel and Judah had been overrun and the people taken into captivity or scat­tered by the Assyrians (721 B.C.) and Babylonians (586 B.C.). After the exile to Babylo­n (586-516 B.C.), Ne­hemi­ah and Ezra were the leaders of God's people. When Ne­hemiah and Ezra saw their peo­ple, they were like slaves. Their children could not speak their own lan­guage. They spoke so many foreign languag­es and dia­lects. The trag­edy was that they only wanted to eat more and pick fights with one another over trivial things. What is worse, they had forgotten the con­cept of God and the law of God. When they forgot God, they were no­thing but hungry animals. But there was Nehemi­ah, who had a fear of God. He beat them, pulled out their hair and re­buked them to be more like God's people (Neh 13:23-28). From then on, they began to receive dis­cipline. Among the disci­plined people, outstanding peo­ple were cho­sen to be the Pharisees. At that time, "the Pharisee" meant great.

To the Jews, the traditions of the elders became an important part of their lives. Through tradition, they did not remain as slaves with a slave mentality. Through tradition, they edified themselves and grew strong. Through tradition, they enhanced them­selves as a peo­ple with identity and exemplary heri­tage. Their tradi­tion enabled them to endure any kind of hardship. They could spread all over the world. Still, they kept their tradi­tions and they were pros­perous.

The Pharisees had indeed been the elite of Israel. But in a matter of time, they obtained social and politi­cal position; they became cor­rupted and the tradi­tion of the Jews became superficial. In Je­sus' time, the Phari­sees were not known as the elite of Israel, but as the most diabolic hyp­ocrites. The Phari­sees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusa­lem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with unwashed hands. To the Pharisees, the disciples broke the tradi­tion of ceremonial washing. They broke the tradition of ceremonial washing and ate food very deli­ciously with unwashed hands. It was a seri­ous mat­ter for the Phari­sees because the disciples broke the traditions of the elders. At that time, breaking the tradition of the elders meant rebelling against the peo­ple in authori­ty. In other words, by breaking the tradition of cere­monial wash­ing, the disciples were mis­under­stood as revolutionaries.

Con­cerning a handwashing ceremony, it is said that people held out their hands with their finger­tips pointing upward and water was poured over their hands until it ran down their wrists. The minimum amount of water used was half an eggshell full. The tradition was good. But when it was degenerated it was nothing but a comedian's show. Not only did they keep the handwashing ceremony, they ob­served many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and ket­tles (4). We saw the sad story in the movie "Fiddler on the Roof" of how three daugh­ters struggled to keep the tradition and, at the same time, to mar­ry the men they liked, even if they violated Jew­ish tradi­tions.

Usually the Pharisees did not confront Jesus face to face to ask questions. But this time they were overconfi­dent and approached Je­sus to accuse his disciples of breaking the traditions. Look at verse 5. "So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, 'Why don't your disciples live accord­ing to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with "un­clean" hands?'" In this way, the tradition lost its original spirit. In this way, the tradition transposed into a political tool of people in authority.

**Second,** Jesus teaches the Pharisees that they should honor God with their hearts (6-8). The Pharisees were sup­posed to be the shepherds of God's people. They should take care of his suffering people. They should pray that his people would be raised as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:6). But they were too corrupted to do so. Mat­thew 23:24 says, "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." Again, Matthew 23:27 says, "Woe to you, teach­ers of the law and Phar­isees, you hypo­crites! You are like white­washed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything un­clean." After rebuking them, Jesus defended his disciples who ate food deli­ciously with unwashed hands. Look at vers­es 6-7. "He replied, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypo­crites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teach­ings are but rules taught by men."'" Jesus rebuked the Pharisees that they lost the spirit of the traditions based on the law of God, which had edified and renovated and even made the people of Israel a new people. When they lost the spirit of the traditions, they be­came like the peo­ple of the former U.S.S.R. before Gorbachev. They said, "We pretend to work and the government pretends to pay us." More­over, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees that they became slaves of tradi­tions. And they forgot the law of God. When they forgot the law of God they aban­doned God. As a result, the Pharisees be­came so evil that they strained out a gnat but swallowed a camel.

The second clause of the Decla­ration of Independence states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are creat­ed equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalien­able Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Hap­pi­ness." In this clause, "these truths" refers to the absolutes of God. "Un­alienable Rights" does not mean to indulge fallen man's sinful free­dom, but to exercise the freedom of choice endowed by God. This Declara­tion later became our American heritage. Like the traditions of the Jewish peo­ple, it became the tradition of America. When our forefa­thers used a God-centered tradition, God bless­ed this country abun­dant­ly. When they were bless­ed abundantly, most people abandoned God and only enjoyed sinful human free­dom in the name of liberty. Our ances­tors were hap­py when they had a fear of God in their hearts. And when they used their un­alienable rights in God, they were happy. But these days, to their frus­tration, when people only enjoyed sinful hu­man free­dom, so many became mental patients and drug addicts and de­pression patients, and so many contemplate sui­cide. In light of American history, abandoning God is the same as abandon­ing unut­terable happi­ness from above. When people aban­doned the abso­lutes of God, our Ameri­­can heritage or tradition degenerat­ed to cul­tural diseases. When peo­­ple go to Las Vegas and become a couple over­night without holy matri­mony, most people think they are okay. But if anyone wants to establish God's family through holy matrimony before God, most peo­ple think that he is crazy. This small American social consensus re­veals that this country has set aside its Christian heri­tage and turned into an anti-Christian nation.

Tradition is good. Civilization is good. Cultural develop­ment is good. But what­ever is made by man cannot be main­tained for good. Man must follow the word of God. The word of God is lifegiv­ing and ever­last­ing. The word of God is the old, old story, but still it was very real to the people in the early days and to the peo­ple in the middle ages and to the people in the modern days, espe­cially for the Ameri­can people. The Gera­sene de­moniac is an old, old story. But this is a story about a man's tragedy when he en­joyed sinful plea­sure only.

II. Jesus rebukes their impure hearts (9-23)

**First,** Jesus rebukes the corrupted hearts of the Pharisees (9-13). Be­cause they were people of God, they should obey the law of God. But when they kept the traditions of the elders and degenerated to cultural diseases, they were utterly corrupted. What is corruption? Corruption does not necessarily mean the corruption of the leg or skin which makes people look like lepers. Corruption means the corruption of one's heart, because the heart is the center of the body and soul. When their hearts were cor­rupt they could not remember the com­mands of God. Verse 10 says, "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'" This is the fifth commandment of God (Ex 20:12). They must honor their parents as long as they are right with God. But the Pharisees and synagogue leaders thought that inactive old parents were not benefi­cial. So they made a rule of Cor­ban, which means, "a gift devoted to God." In the Jewish society, grandfather and grand­mother and father and moth­er and grandchildren lived altogether. They were family-cen­tered people. Most of them served their old par­ents until they passed away. But the Pharisees began to use the rule of Corban, saying, "I am sorry. I really wanted to live with you at my house. But I made all my money Corban. So I hope you can move into a nursing home and take care of your­self." In this way, the Pharisees dis­pleased God and let his people go astray. Why are grandfather and grandmother necessary? It is not enough for children to be loved only by their parents. They also need grand­father's and grandmother's love and care. But these days there are many young people who think that their grandparents are not beneficial. So they send their old par­ents to nursing homes to cry. What could be a solu­tion to prevent the corrup­tion of the heart? We must come back to the word of God.

Many people think that Bible study is another burden in addition to their school studies. But that is a blind mistake. 1 Peter 1:23 says, "For you have been born again, not of per­ishable seed, but of imperish­able, through the living and enduring word of God." 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "All Scrip­ture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuk­ing, correcting and training in righ­teous­ness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipp­ed for every good work." When Jesus satis­fied the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, people liked Jesus. But when Jesus talked about the bread of life (Jn 6:35), people began to run away one by one until only the disciples were left. Jesus asked, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:67-69). 1 Peter 1:24,25a says, "For, 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flow­ers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.'" Those who live in the world without God are always weary and thirsty, even if they drink a lot. But those who abide in the word of God are like a tree planted by streams of water (Ps 1:3,4). Most importantly, the word of God is God himself (Jn 1:1). This country needs direction because hu­man sinful freedom took away the word of God from most Ame­rican young people. These days, those who study the word of God dili­gently are known as "funda­men­talist" or cult members. But from God's point of view, this is the right time for Americans to come back to God and study the Bible diligently so that they may be healed from cultural diseases, and that they may be freed from the torment of the devil.

**Second,** it's a heart problem (14-23). When we study the Bible, espe­cially Leviticus, God taught his holy children concerning the clean and unclean problem. It is because they are holy children of God. God wanted them to eat holy things. God wanted them to speak and act holy. God wanted them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy na­tion. But in Jesus' time, the clean and unclean problem was only relat­ed to ceremony. If one performed a handwash­ing ceremony he was clean. If one grew a moustache and beard he was ceremonially clean. Jesus told them that it is not a cere­moni­al problem but a heart prob­lem. "Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, 'Listen to me, every­one, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him "un­clean" by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him "unclean"'" (14,15). In short, food cannot make people un­clean. One's heart can make him unclean.

After Jesus left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this para­ble. Jesus rebuked them, "Are you so dull?" and ex­plained, "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stom­ach, and then out of his body." "(In saying this, Jesus de­clared all foods 'clean')" (18-19). Here Jesus plainly says that the Phari­sees' hearts are not right with God. Their hearts are corrupted and they have no word of God. They made use of his suffering people and they wanted to de­stroy the work of God which was being carried out by Jesus. It is unbelievable that the cho­sen people became so petty, plagued by tra­dition and culture. It is unbe­lievable that they wanted to destroy Je­sus.

In this passage we learn that all men are very habitual like ani­mals. Most people live ac­cord­ing to social consensus like dead fish floating down the stream. We must not be victims of tradition or cul­tural diseases. We must come back to the word of God.