


BAD TRADITIONS

MARK 7:1-23

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 Our scripture lesson today deals with the topic of traditions. In MARK 7:4, we read that the Jews observed many traditions. In verse 5, the Jewish leaders asked Jesus why His disciples did not live according to the tradition of the elders. In verse 8, Jesus accused the Jewish leaders of letting go of the commands of God and holding on to the traditions of men. In verse 9 Jesus again accuses the Jewish leaders of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe traditions. And in verse 13, the word “tradition” appears yet another time. The topic of traditions clearly stands out as the main topic of this passage of scripture.

According to the dictionary, a tradition is a long-established custom or practice that has the effect of an unwritten law. In other words, traditions are like laws. They are things that we do, because we are expected to do them. Whether or not they are written down, they are like laws. If we violate them, we will make people upset and there will be some kind of unpleasant result.

Now, there would be no reason to violate traditions if all traditions were good. But, all traditions are not good. Some, in fact, are very bad, because they prevent us from understanding and obeying truth.

In JOHN 8:32, Jesus proclaimed that it is the truth that will set us free. The truth that Jesus was talking about was the *truth of God's Word*, and the freedom that Jesus was talking about was the *freedom from the bondage of sin*. Our problem is an inner one, not an outer one. From the time of birth, we are defiled on the inside. The Bible says that the hearts of men are full of evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. In order to clean all that mess out, we need the truth of God's Word to come into our hearts. Traditions cannot clean people on the inside where their insides need to be cleaned. The best thing that traditions can do is to help people connect to the truth so that they can be cleaned. The worse thing that traditions can do is to block people from the truth so that they will remain in their wretched condition. Traditions that do this are bad traditions.

Today's message is intended to challenge you to take a stand against bad traditions. I am not trying to attack one particular bad tradition that exists in our church or in our community. It wouldn't be a very wise move on my part to point out a certain practice in our church and tell all of you to rebel against that practice. No, my purpose of preaching this sermon is not to start a rebellion. Instead, I hope that this sermon will cause us all to become better equipped at recognizing a bad tradition when we see one and then have both the courage and the wisdom to take a stand against it. And, believe me, when you take a stand against a tradition, both courage and wisdom will be needed.

A group of Christians once formed a committee to solve a problem. The group realized that their church had a tradition that seemed to violate a biblical principal. The biblical principal was that all believers are equally important in the eyes of God. Although we have different gifts, in God's eyes, we are all priests. And, no one in the church should be considered as being more important than another.

For this reason, the group of Christians were disturbed about the fact that their church required all of its pastors to wear clothes which made them look different from everyone else. All pastors were required to wear a stiff, white collar with a plain, dark shirt. They felt that requiring the pastors to dress this way seemed to say that they were more spiritual or important than everyone else. They felt that this was in violation with what the Bible teaches.

So, they formed a committee to investigate how the tradition began. To their surprise, they discovered that many years ago everyone wore the very same kind of clothes that their pastors were now required to wear—everyone, that is, except the pastors. At that time the pastors were all required to wear robes. And, they continued to wear robes until the day came when some people began to question why the pastors were required to dress in robes when all the other men wore plain, dark shirts with white collars. The more they questioned, the more they felt it was wrong; therefore, they asked their pastors to dress like everyone else so they would not appear as more spiritual or more important. That decision made the pastors look like everyone else until styles changed again and men began wearing suits and ties.

So the committee discovered that, when it started, the tradition that required the pastors to wear plain, dark shirts with white collars actually helped them to obey the Bible which they believed taught that all believers are equal. But, the tradition that started as being good turned bad when it began to contradict the very principal that it was intended to support.

The problem that church faced is the same problem that many churches face time and time again. When traditions substitute or contradict truth or the Law of God, they end up doing people more harm than good. In MARK 7:8, Jesus said to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, "**You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.**" And again, in verse 9 He said, "**You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions.**"

In today's Scripture reading we read about a group of Scribes and Pharisees who were sent up to Galilee from Jerusalem to oppose Jesus. The news of what Jesus and His disciples were doing in Galilee had not only traveled to the royal palace of Herod, but it had also traveled to Jerusalem. And, when the religious leaders in Jerusalem heard what was going on, they were upset. The reason why they were upset was because Jesus was violating tradition.

And, they were right. Jesus was violating tradition. This is a very important point that I want you to consider. There were certain traditions that Jesus *consistently, intentionally, and resolutely* violated.

Jesus violated certain traditions consistently. He healed people on the Sabbath which was a violation of tradition. And, He did it over and over again. He was consistent in His violation of certain traditions.

And, Jesus violated certain traditions intentionally. He had a strong conviction that certain traditions were bad because they caused people to disregard the commands of God. In MARK 7:11, Jesus attacked a certain tradition which forbid people from using money to support their parents if the money had been dedicated to God. The Old Testament teaches children to support their parents, but people were neglecting their obligation by saying that their money had already been dedicated to the Temple. Jesus had no trouble violating this kind of tradition, because He was convinced it was bad.

One day Jesus asked a question. He asked, "**Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?**" Jesus knew the answer to that question was to do good and to save life, even though it would violate tradition to do so. Therefore, Jesus intentionally violated tradition to do good. What He did was no accident.

And finally, Jesus violated certain traditions resolutely. That means that He was determined to carry through with His actions despite the opposition He would face. When He violated tradition, He faced great opposition and anger and hatred. But none of this stopped Him. He had counted the cost and was willing to pay the price. He was determined to violate the traditions He knew were keeping people away from God regardless of the opposition He would face.

So, Jesus violated certain traditions consistently, intentionally, and resolutely. And, this fact presents the average Christian with a tremendous challenge. The average person tries to avoid confrontation if at all possible, but Jesus leaves us with an example that challenges us not to be passive when we are confronted with bad traditions. When we see what Jesus did, we are forced to ask the question, "as His disciples, are we obliged to do the same?" If we are confronted with a rule or a tradition that causes us to actually violate the principles of God's Word, are we obliged to stand in opposition of that principle or that rule? Our theme for the year tells us to imitate Christ, but should we imitate Him by violating bad traditions when we see them?

Think about the consequence of answering no to that question. If I am convinced that a certain tradition which directly affects me and those who are close to me is a bad tradition which hurts my relationship with God, and if I decide to say, "No, I will not to oppose that tradition," then what will happen? Well, probably two things will happen. Most likely I will avoid conflict with other people. And, that appeals to me. But, on the other hand, I will increase the conflict within my heart. I will have to force myself to compromise the truth in some way. I will most likely have to lie, if not to other people, then I will at least have to lie to myself. I will have to tell myself that obeying the commandment of God is not as important as maintaining unity and harmony with those around me. And, that is a lie. So, in the end I will find it easier to live with others, but more difficult to live with myself.

As I have thought about all of this, I have concluded that it is better to live in conflict with others and be at

peace with myself and God than to live in harmony with others and be at conflict with myself and God. I have concluded that I do have a duty to follow the example that Christ clearly gives us in today's Scripture lesson and many other passages in the New Testament. Jesus opposed traditions that were bad, and in many cases He opposed them to the point where He actually violated them. And, I must conclude that all of us who follow Christ have a duty to do the same.

Now I could get myself into big trouble at this point by putting into your minds the idea that a certain tradition practiced by your parents or in our church is a bad tradition. For me to single out and attack a particular tradition today might even cause some of you to rise up in rebellion. But, like I told you already, my purpose in preaching this sermon is not to start a rebellion. My purpose is to help you become better equipped so that, when you recognize a bad tradition, you can have both the courage and the wisdom to take a stand against it.

In order to do that, I will need to share with you some things that I have learned from experience. I want to give you a few guidelines that I hope will help you as you oppose certain practices that you know are not right. The list of guidelines I will give you will not be complete, but they are things I have learned from experience, and hopefully they will be helpful to you.

The first guideline I would like to give you is, before you oppose a tradition, make sure that the tradition you oppose actually causes people not to obey what the Bible teaches.

In recent years, a significant number of churches have made a decision to move from the traditional church structure to a small group structure. When I say "traditional church structure," I am talking about a structure where most activities in the church come in the form of large meetings being led by just a few people. Our Sunday worship service would be one example of what I am now calling a traditional structure.

Now, the point I want to make is that it is not right to oppose a tradition of using large meetings led by a small number of people as long as those meetings are doing what God wants us as a church to do, and doing it well. We should not oppose a traditional way of doing things just because we want to follow the most recent trend talked about in church growth magazines. Churches that have traditions of using large meetings led by a few people as the primary strategy for outreach should only break the tradition if they are convinced that large group meetings are no longer the most effective way of doing outreach. The Bible tells us that we should reach out to non-Christians with the gospel, and we should be doing that in the best way possible. If a certain traditional way of doing things actually is preventing us from obeying the truth in the best way possible, we must be willing to challenge the traditional way, even if it requires a change in structure to do so.

Bad traditions are the ones that cause people to become disconnected from the truth so that they disregard or contradict the commandments of God. Jesus accused the Scribes and Pharisees of "letting go of the commandments of God and holding on to the traditions of men." We must be sure that the traditions we are opposing are actually causing people to let go of the commandments of God.

In some situations, large group meetings led by a few people may still be the best way to do outreach. And if that is the case, then we should not try to change things.

And, let me tell you, when you are trying to understand if a tradition is bad or not, you will discover that everything is not black and white. Up to this point, I have only been talking about good and bad traditions. But, there are some traditions that can be categorized as gray. They don't really cause people to let go of the commandments of God, but neither do they help people draw close to the commands of God. My own experience tells me that it is not wise to spend a great deal of time and energy in opposing this kind of tradition. And, I think that what I have learned from experience can be backed up with scripture.

During Christ's earthly ministry, Jewish people were required to pay a temple tax. One day Jesus made a few comments about this tradition. The tax collectors had come to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?" Peter answered, "Yes He does." Jesus had decided not to violate that tradition, but listen to what Jesus had to say about it as I quote from MATTHEW 17:25-27:

When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. "What do you think, Simon?" he asked. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes--from their own sons or from

others?" "From others," Peter answered. "Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him. "But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."

The words of Jesus suggest that, for the sons of God, paying the temple tax was not a meaningful tradition. The tradition of paying a temple tax may not have been that meaningful, but neither was it that harmful. It did not matter enough to offend other people by violating it. Remember that there were other traditions where it did matter enough to oppose them even at the expense of offending other people; but with this tradition, it just was not all that important.

So, the first guideline I leave you with is that we must be sure traditions are bad before we oppose them. When Jesus violated tradition, He was sure that the tradition was preventing people from obeying the truth. When we violate tradition, we must do so for the same reason. If there is any doubt in our minds, then it is best not to make waves.

A second guideline is that when we decide to oppose a certain practice, make sure you understand the cultural setting of the tradition. Some traditions may be bad in one cultural setting and not bad in another cultural setting.

There are many things that are different between the cultures of the northeastern and southeastern United States. One of the differences is the way funerals are conducted. In the south, music is a very important part of funerals. Often there is singing during the funeral service. For that reason, organs are found in almost every funeral home. But, in the north, where I come from, funerals are more quiet. As a child growing up in Pennsylvania, I attended several funerals, but I never saw a funeral home with an organ. Instead, soft music would be piped in over an intercom system. I was never aware that funeral homes had organs until one day when I was conducting a funeral together with another pastor from the south. When the funeral was over, the southern pastor began to scold the funeral director for not having an organ in the funeral home. He told the director that all decent funeral homes had organs and that it was wrong for him to not have an organ and at the same time be driving an expensive car. But, that southern pastor was not opposing bad tradition; rather, he was opposing a culture that was different from his own.

When we get used to doing things one way, it is difficult for us to see any other way as being right. In Taiwan, having everyone praying out loud and all at the same time is a common practice. When I first arrived in Taiwan, it was hard for me to get used to that practice. But it was wrong for me to consider it wrong just because it was not a part of my culture. Likewise, it would be wrong for someone who comes from Taiwan to this country to think that everyone here must pray in that fashion. Traditions are not bad just because they are different from the way we are used to doing things. They are only bad if they prevent people from obeying the truth.

A third guideline to opposing bad tradition is the need to realize that we will probably do little to change a tradition unless we have first gained some amount of respect for other people. People who are not in positions of influence can do little to change bad traditions. Take Jesus for example. For thirty years He grew up among Jewish people who had bad traditions. But, it wasn't until He was in a position of influence that He began to violate the traditions in a way that got people upset and in a way that eventually caused change. By trying to make waves before we have gained the respect of our peers, we will draw attention to ourselves, but we will do little to produce change. Not in all cases, but in most cases, it is wise to wait until we are in a position of influence before we begin to fight tradition.

And then, there is a fourth guideline that has to do with our motives. That is, when opposing a bad tradition, we must make sure our motives are correct. We must make sure that the things we are attacking are the bad traditions and not the people who are practicing the traditions. We must separate the issue from the person; otherwise, we will become bitter toward people.

Now, I admit that this is very hard to do. In fact, it is almost impossible to oppose what people are doing without them taking it personally. But, even if people become bitter toward us, we must trust God to help us not become bitter toward them. We must love people even when we stand opposed to what they are doing.

A good way to oppose bad tradition is to identify the teaching behind the bad tradition and do what we can to give correct teaching. Practices that prevent people from obeying the truth are often supported by false teaching.

In Christ's day people were not financially supporting their parents because they had been taught that money devoted to God could not be used to support parents who had a financial need. Jesus attacked that teaching and replaced it with the true teaching that children have an obligation to support the needs of their parents, and nothing makes them exempt from that obligation. If we can replace the false teaching with good teaching, then people will no longer have a basis for continuing the bad practice. It's OK to attack bad teaching and bad tradition. It's not OK to attack people.

And finally, we must be willing to pay the price. When Jesus opposed bad tradition, He had to pay a high price. Eventually, He had to suffer and die for what He believed. People who are not willing to pay the price will back down from their position as soon as they begin to suffer.

I believe the five guidelines I have just mentioned are important guidelines to follow when we are opposing bad traditions. But, you may think that with so many guidelines, it is best not to oppose bad traditions at all. I hope that you do not come to that conclusion, because I believe that we do have an obligation to oppose traditions that are bad.

A balance is needed. On the one hand we must take serious our responsibility to stand against bad traditions. On the other hand, we must be aware of the dangers we will face when we begin to violate tradition. Opposing any tradition is very serious business, and we must not take it lightly.

The church in which I grew up had a tradition which forbid me from attending churches from other denominations. But, after I heard the gospel, I decided to violate that tradition. I did not advertise what I was doing, but I did begin to attend services in churches outside my denomination. Once my mother found out what I was doing, she became worried and scheduled an appointment for me to talk with a priest. When the priest found out what I was doing, and that I no longer believed church tradition to be superior to the Bible, he told me that I was no longer permitted to receive communion in my home church.

Violating tradition has very serious consequences, so we better know what we are doing before we do it. But take courage, because you have a Friend who has walked this path before you. The same Christ that opposed the bad traditions of His day lives inside of you and will give you the courage you need when the time comes. So let us ask Him to give us both the courage and the wisdom we will need to oppose the traditions that keep people from obeying the commands of God. God needs both courageous and wise people to bring about renewal in His church.

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Application Question: Perhaps you or someone in your small group is struggling with a certain tradition imposed upon him by family, society or church. See if it is possible to help that person in his/her struggle. Remember that the tradition the person is struggling with may or may not be a bad tradition. We should take this into consideration when we are sharing or praying.