

## Mark 7:5-8,14-15,21-23

September 6, 2015

Pastor P. Martin

Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY

Pentecost 15

*Mark 7:5 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?”*

*<sup>6</sup> 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.*

*<sup>7</sup> They worship me in vain;  
their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ <sup>8</sup> You have let go of the  
commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men...”*

*<sup>14</sup> Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. <sup>15</sup> 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...’”*

*<sup>21</sup> For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup> greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <sup>23</sup> All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’ ”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

### THE ENEMY WITHIN

Dear Friends In Our Savior,

I’m not saying it’s a good thing, but few things are as satisfying as saying “Gotcha.” The student wrote the correct answer on the test, but the teacher marked it wrong. Even if the student failed, any bad feelings about the grade disappear when the teacher has to admit that on that one question, the teacher was wrong.

If ever a parent changes his or her mind about going to the pool on a hot summer day, a child is quick to remind the parent, “But you said...” We all love to say “Gotcha,” especially to someone higher up the totem pole.

I just tried this the other day. In your internet search engine type in the word “hypocrite.” Then before “hypocrite”, type in just about any other word you like. Type in conservative, liberal, atheistic, religious hypocrite, or just about any other word and you get millions of hits. Everyone loves to point out somebody else’s hypocrisy. I am not saying this is good. It is just human nature.

#### I. Hypocritical Rules

What is a hypocrite? A hypocrite is someone who demands a certain level of conduct from other people, but does not live up to that conduct in his own life. People love to point out hypocrites.

Which is just what Jesus’ enemies were doing when they asked Jesus (well, they didn’t really ask him, they accused him), “***Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands [that is, unwashed]?***” (5). What’s the big deal about washing hands? Are Jesus’ enemies concerned about hygiene? No. We may wash before meals for health reasons. But the Pharisees were talking about a religious custom. It wasn’t in the Bible, but about 200BC, religious Jews began to insist that people wash their hands before eating. That washing

was to wash away religious defilement. To not wash before eating was immoral.

This is how it went in their minds: “We have a well-established tradition that all decent and religious people wash their hands before they eat. You, Jesus, don’t make sure your followers follow this very simple rule. How can you claim to be a religious teacher, much less a Messiah?” You see, it wasn’t so much about clean hands as it was about proving Jesus wrong, proving him a hypocrite.

We can understand that. Easiest way to score points in an argument is to show that the other person is a hypocrite. It makes all their arguments meaningless. “If you yourself don’t do this, why are we talking about it?”

If you have been coming to church a while, from other Bible readings and sermons you know that there were just oodles of these sorts of rules that the Jewish religious establishment had cooked up.

It is still there to this day—there was a seminary professor who was working on his doctorate in Near Eastern studies. He spent quite a bit of his time with some rabbis in a certain city. With a particularly strict rabbi he got onto the subject of clean, “kosher”, food. The rabbi said that there were over 50 Jewish restaurants in the city. All of them claimed to serve “kosher” food. But as a rabbi, he vouch for only three restaurants as actually “kosher.” It is not just what is on the menu, but how the food is prepared, how it was stored, who is preparing it, and the list went on.

If you are like me, you can’t stand bureaucratic red tape. Well, in Jesus’ day they had religious red tape. As an example, Jesus pointed out that, not he, but they, were the hypocrites. “*Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ ...But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is... a gift devoted to God,’ then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.*” (10-12). Now this gets kind of deep. But it is important for us to understand what is going on. Their religious leaders had ruled that if a person promised to give something to the church, he had to give it. (So far, so good.) But the problem came in when someone in a fit of generosity promised something they really couldn’t afford to give. Back in the days before mutual funds and Social Security, kids bankrolled their parents when they got older. But what if the money to feed and clothe Ma and Pa got pledged to the church? Well, they decided, you need to give the money to church, just like you promised. Ma and Pa will just have to wait their turn. Then someone asked them an inconvenient question, “What if Ma and Pa are on the point of starving?” They said, “Nope. Give it to God. But here is what you can do. You can take the money, give it as a gift of charity to a third party, and that third party can give it to your parents. But you can’t give it directly to your parents.” (Edersheim, p.489, fn.) Really? Yes. That was the point of the hand washing too. It wasn’t about the hand washing, it was about this big complex body of rules and laws.

Jesus knew that their religious law code was full of hypocrisies like that. There were all these rules and rulings that gave the appearance of spirituality. But it was all man-made rules. So Jesus harshly condemned them, “*Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites... You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men*” (5,8).

Jesus condemned this habit we have for setting up human rules. We like to make those human rules our yardstick for measuring whether we are good with God. That was why the Pharisees walked around with Bible passages on their clothes, why they would openly give large amounts of money, why they would “Tisk, tisk” when the prostitutes and tax collectors showed up at church. It was a show. And following the rules proved that you were good enough for God. Repentance and God’s forgiveness were far from them.

## II. What About Our Rules?

So then, here is the question for us today: Are man-made rules and customs bad? Over the years, some people have said, “Yes.” When Martin Luther and early Lutherans set about reforming the church, they changed many problems they found in the Catholic Church. They also kept many good

traditions from the Catholic Church. But while Lutherans retained what they found good, some people misunderstood these words of Jesus here, and they started to get rid of everything. They smashed the stained glass – idolatry they called it. They didn't allow pastors to wear robes –prideful customs, they said. Church holidays and the like – man-made traditions they called them.

And they were partly right. They are human traditions. They didn't understand. They simply thought that human tradition was evil. But that is not what Jesus said. Listen to Jesus' words. ***“You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men”*** (8). When traditions make us let go of God's Word, then they are evil. So for us, it is good to ask us what our church traditions do. We must be sure that we are not “letting go of the commands of God and holding on to the traditions of men.”

But, our traditions can be used support God's Word and his commands. Beautiful stained glass windows teach us through our eyes; they teach the truths of God's Word. (The youth who have grown up in this church will remember this stained glass for the rest of their lives, just as I do from my childhood church. Scripture truths are crystalized in those stained glass windows.) The music we sing and hear in worship helps us worship better. (Just think of how many of you can recite parts of favorite hymns, or who say, “I really liked that one!” How often do you say that about Bible passages.) Human traditions and customs can support the word of God.

### **III. Rules That Keep Us Close To God**

But then the question is, “How do I know if our traditions are good or not?” ***“Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen to me, everyone, and understand this...’*** And I think it is important for me to stop right now. and make something clear. In the first part of my sermon Jesus was on fire. He was rebuking the hypocrites among God's people. But here he “called to the crowd.” No longer was Jesus fiercely, intensely, reprimanding his enemies. Now he turned to his disciples and he taught them as earnestly and sincerely, and as softly as we teach the great truths of life to our children.

***“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.’...For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean’”*** (14-15,21-23).

Here is the fundamental difference between the rules Jesus opposed and the kinds of rules we need. Rules are not to prove how good we are. Quite the opposite. We have traditions and rules because we realize that evil lurks within us.

Every sin is because we have made a sinful choice. In this age of victimization, we blame our sins on anything and everything: bad parents, poverty, affluence, greedy financial systems, bad friends. But the fact of the matter, as Jesus states it, is that every sin is our own fault. ***“All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”***

You see, Christianity is not freedom from all rules. We can't just cheer Jesus when he sent those rule-bound hypocrites packing—and once the commotion is over turn back to our table to drink another cold one glad that we don't have to be bothered by the holier-than-thou crowd. No, a follower of Jesus doesn't get rid of all the rules. But he makes sure all the rules serve a greater good.

So when we ask if our traditions are good or not, we need to ask if our man-made traditions and rules bring us closer to God, guarding our hearts and minds in Jesus. Or do our traditions separate us from God? Do they create pride and arrogance, greed or slander? Or do they promote worship and trust in God, and respect and love for all other people?

Well, that is where our reading leaves it. Jesus condemns self-righteous hypocrites, and he tells us that the greatest evil we have to fear is that within ourselves. And when I get to the end of this reading,

I despair.

Because I will never achieve that freedom from the enemy within. It all sounded so good. It is be a nice goal for life, like the sort of thing a valedictorian might say at graduation. But in reality, I cannot keep my heart pure every moment of any day, no matter how hard I try. And so I cannot stop at this point where Jesus teaches us a valuable rule about what sorts of rules are beneficial for life. I must continue down the timeline of Jesus' life, past his birth, his baptism, his feeding the 5,000, and this teaching about man-made rules and the evil within, and I must follow his life to the cross. Because the cross is the only cure for our problem – the stain of sin in our hearts. That is where we find resolution. At the cross we can lay our burden down, all our spiritual hypocrisies and all the sinful choices we daily make. And with Christ's strength we continue on in his mercy and grace, confident of his approval, not because I have fulfilled all the rules, but because he has fulfilled them for me. Amen.