

Traditions
April 8, 2018

I know some of you have heard this story before. A new pastor at a church was invited to the home of a church member for dinner. He was in the kitchen talking to the family as the wife brought a turkey out of the oven and opened the roasting pan. The minister noticed that the turkey had been cut in half. He asked the woman why she did that. She replied, "Well, I don't really know the reason behind it. My mother always did that."

Well the woman's mother was also a member of his church, so later that week he asked the mother why she always cut the turkey in half. She said that her mother had always done so.

Her mother also was still alive and a member of his church, so he asked her why she always cut the turkey in half. She said, "Because I had a small roasting pan and I had to cut it in half to make it fit." Cutting the turkey in half had become an unspoken family tradition. Two generations cut the turkey in half, but had no idea why.

The word tradition as we most often use it means "**Tradition = customs, rituals, or practices handed down orally and/or by example, from generation to generation.**" Often the original reason for the practice is forgotten. The lasting reason becomes, "We've always done it."

Some superstitions develop from traditions whose origins have been forgotten. Some people today believe it to be bad luck to walk under a ladder. Let me share how this superstition developed. In the middle ages someone pointed out that a ladder leaning against a wall formed a triangle. Triangles had become a symbol in the church for the trinity. So it was proposed that walking through the triangle would be an act of disrespect toward God. So people avoided walking under ladders. Over time the original reason was forgotten and a superstition about bad luck took its place.

Communities develop traditions. Families do to. When I do pre-marital counseling with couples I warn them to watch out for conflicting family traditions. If the husband grew up in a family where the wife always did the laundry, he likely will expect his wife to do the laundry. If his new wife grew up in a family where her dad always did the laundry, she likely will expect her husband to do so. This conflict in traditions could lead to counseling to sort out their dirty laundry.

Churches develop traditions also. Just this week I read of two churches that agreed to merge together to form one new church. But as they started working out the details they came to an impasse and quit the process. The impasse was the Lord's Prayer. One congregation prayed the prayer using the word trespasses and the other used the word debts. And neither would compromise.

In today's passage in the Book of Mark, Jesus encounters one of the traditions of the Jewish leaders.

Mark 7:1-8 (NIV) 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 hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they

observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) 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?" 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.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

Jesus does not answer their question. Instead, he rebukes them for their traditions. We need to understand why he does so. There is an important lesson here for us.

Now there was a reason for establishing the traditions of the elders. These rules started back at the end of the Exile. The Exile was a period in Israel's history when God allowed an enemy nation, the Babylonians, to conquer Judah. The Babylonians then carried off many of the Jews to Babylon to live. Second Kings 24 records this for us.

2 Kings 24:14-15 (NIV) He (Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon) carried into exile all Jerusalem: all the officers and fighting men, and all the craftsmen and artisans--a total of ten thousand. Only the poorest people of the land were left. Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin (King of Judah) captive to Babylon. He also took from Jerusalem to Babylon the king's mother, his wives, his officials and the leading men of the land.

All the leaders of Israel were either dead or exiled to Babylon. God had allowed this in order to punish Israel and teach them to obey His commands.

After 70 years God allowed the people to return to Jerusalem. The leaders were afraid that the nation would once again slip into patterns of disobedience. So a group of the leaders came up with a plan to prevent history from repeating itself. They devised a plan to make sure the nation would keep the commands of God.

This plan called for the creation of a new set of rules. These rules would help prevent the nation from disobeying God. Let me give you an example of their approach to the problem.

Let's say that you are trying to teach your young child not to touch the stove. You don't want your child to get burned. But instead of trying to enforce that rule, you make a different rule. You make a rule that all children are to stay out of the kitchen. That would certainly protect your young child from touching the stove.

This is the kind of approach that the leaders took. **The Jews called this plan "building a hedge (fence) around the Law"**. They developed a huge list of very restrictive rules that, they hoped, would keep the nation from sinning against God.

Just this one rule about washing the hands was very involved. It was not as simple a practice as we do. It had to be done a special way. There were rules about how you held your hands, how much water to use, where the water came from and on and on and on.

Now what happened with these rules is the same thing that often happens with such practices, the origin of the practice was forgotten. But the practice continued, each generation teaching the next one. **After many years the new rules were accepted as law, as if God had given them.** In fact, in the days of Jesus some religious leaders taught that God had given these rules to Moses.

Jesus knew the truth. Jesus kept God's commands, but not the traditions of the elders. This was one of the reasons the religious leaders were out to get rid of Jesus.

Now, Jesus was not against washing hands before eating. Anyone who hates biting down on grit would want to wash his hands. Or someone who wants to avoid germs would want to wash his hands. But the Pharisees did not wash for those reasons.

Their washing was a ceremonial thing, not a cleanliness thing. Over time they made an idol of their traditions. They made them a way to please God.

Jesus accuses them of replacing the commands of God. And then He gave them an example of this.

Mark 7:9-13 (NIV) And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

One of the commands of God was that they honor their parents. Part of this was providing food and shelter for their parents when they were old and could not work any longer. This was the expectation of God. Yet the tradition of the elders said a person could declare his estate as Corban. Corban means gift.

Let's say that a certain man doesn't want to support his parents or pay his creditors. He commits his whole estate to God. He gives a big offering of his estate to the temple immediately, as a sort of down payment. He then continues to control and live on the rest of his estate. Except now, by law, he can't be forced to use his estate to pay his creditors or provide for his parents.

These men were pretending to care about God, even while they were ignoring God's commands.

Now let's talk about the application of this passage to us. Some traditions are good. The problem is not traditions. The problem is how we misuse them.

Many religious traditions are personal preferences, not commands of Jesus.

Just as communities and families develop traditions, so do churches. Churches have many religious traditions. Some of these include when and how to worship. When and how a church worships is not commanded by Jesus.

Jesus made no commands about having flags, what kind of musical instruments to use, what style of music to sing, whether to sit on pews or chairs. Yet, these things, and many, many more are traditions in many churches.

But these traditions are just preferences, not commands. We must make that distinction. We must keep that in mind.

1. Do not pretend or teach that your traditions are commands of the Lord.

Believers baptism is a command of the Lord. Flags are not. Pews are not. Worship on Sunday morning is not.

The Lord's Supper is a command of the Lord. Grape juice is not. Unleavened bread is not.

2. Teach the origin and purpose of traditions.

We do not do Vacation Bible School out of tradition. It is an intentional act of outreach and evangelism. There were some years that we did it out of tradition. Then we quit doing it for several years. Then we restarted, but as an intentional act of outreach and evangelism. Each year we teach this as the reason for doing VBS.

That is not true of all our traditions. Many we do because we always have. The church was doing Easter Sunrise and Thanksgiving Day Services before I came. Those are long standing traditions in our church. But we do not teach the origin or purpose of doing them.

3. Do not consider your traditions as a means to God's grace.

Do not think that God is going to reward you for doing things He has not commanded you to do, no matter how important they are to you. Every bit of our salvation is due to Jesus' death on the cross. The merit for every blessing of God is all the merit Jesus earned by dying on the cross. Practicing your traditions earns you no merit, no grace, no reward.

4. Do not force your traditions on others or judge them as less Christian, less spiritual, or less godly for having different traditions.

The Pharisees added rules for all to follow. Christians and churches often do too. We put expectations on each other that God has not commanded. And then we take pride in keeping our rules and expectations.

But, we are not better Christians than other Christians or a better church than other churches because we have a worship service on Thanksgiving Day when they do not. Don't let yourself think such things. Don't take pride in your preferences, in your traditions over the traditions or lack thereof of other Christians.

Invitation to Respond to Jesus

Possibly the Holy Spirit has convicted you of sin in the area of your traditions. Now is a good time to confess and repent as we go to the Lord in prayer.

If anyone is ready to receive Jesus as Savior and Lord now is a good time to respond to Him in prayer.