

Mark 7:1-13 (Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 16—Series B)

“The Word of God Not of People”

Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT

August 22, 2021

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text is the Gospel lesson recorded in Mark 7:

¹And the Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered to Him, having come from Jerusalem. ²And when they saw that some of His disciples were eating their loaves of bread with unclean, that is unwashed, hands—³for the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat if they do not wash their hands, from elbow to knuckles, adhering to the tradition of the elders. ⁴And coming from the marketplace, if they do not purify themselves, they do not eat, and many other things there are which they receive by tradition to observe, ritual washings of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches—⁵and the Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but they eat their bread with unclean hands?” ⁶But He answered them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy concerning you hypocrites, as it stands written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁷And in vain they worship me, teaching teachings which are the commandments of people.’ ⁸Having left the commandment of God you hold on to the tradition of people.” ⁹And He continued to say to them, “Well do you reject the commandment of God in order that you may observe your tradition. ¹⁰For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and ‘The one who reviles father or mother, let him surely die.’ ¹¹But as for you, you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you would have received from me is Korban,’ that is, a gift to God, then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father and mother, ¹³making void the word of God by your tradition which you have handed on. And many such things you do.”

The tradition was that they could not eat their meals except they wash. In other words, the Pharisees and scribes held to the tradition that said they could not eat their meals if they do not practice a ceremonial washing of their hands and utensils to remove any possible ritualistic defilement from contact with Gentiles (non-Jews). The Jewish historian Josephus wrote in his *Jewish Antiquities*, “Now I want to make plain that the Pharisees handed down some customs to the people from the successors of the fathers that are not read in the law of Moses.”¹ Did you catch that? The tradition of the elders is not the God-given Torah

¹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.297. Quoted in James W. Voelz, *Mark 1:1-8:26*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 455.

(instruction) that He gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai. So, Jesus is spot on when He tells the religious leaders, "Well did Isaiah prophesy concerning you hypocrites, as it stands written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching teachings which are the commandments of people.' Having left the commandment of God you hold on to the tradition of people."

But maybe Jesus is overdoing it a bit? The oral law, the oral tradition, was put in place to "put a fence" around the Torah of Moses to protect God's Law from being violated. It was designed to keep the people of Israel from breaking the Commandments. But the problem is that, in fact, the tradition of the elders tampered with the Law. It added to it rules that were stricter than the Law of God. It was by keeping these hefty mandates that the Pharisees and scribes could maintain their own ritual purity in the sight of God.

So, Jesus isn't overdoing it. It is the followers of the traditions of the elders that are overdoing it. And what they are overdoing is what God set up for them. The Law was not designed to make life difficult for God's people, but that's exactly what happens when the traditions of people put a fence around the Law to keep people away from breaking it. These human regulations overburdened God's people and finally outdid God's own Torah! If you don't ritually wash from you elbows to your knuckles, you are defiled before God, and therefore, cannot eat. If you don't purify your cups and copper pots and even your dining couches on which you recline at table, you are defiled before God, and cannot eat.

But that's not what God's Law said. However, God's Law did say, "Honor your father and your mother." We know that's the Fourth Commandment. But, following the oral tradition, the Pharisees and scribes negated God's commandment with their own that said

that if a son tells his parents that whatever help and support he might have given them through the years is a gift to God, then the son doesn't have to help, support, and love his parents because all of what belongs to the son he is giving to God. "Sorry, Mom and Dad! Guess I can't do anything for you!" But the Commandment of God says, "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them." The oral tradition, Jesus said, thus voided the word of God.

And yet it was this oral tradition of the elders that the Pharisees and scribes demanded that the people obey in order maintain their purity before God. But they should have been directing the people to God's Word.

Living by man-made traditions, whether it is those of the Pharisees or those of today, is living contrary the Word of God. Just as God's Old Testament laws did not command this ceremonial washing of hands in the days of Jesus, so God's Word in the Bible does not speak of people living a "pure" life to gain heaven. In attempting to do so, we leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of people. It is a "man-made-up" tradition that we can go to heaven because of how we act or don't act. The Word of God says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24). In Titus 3:5, "[God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit."

People can act like Christians, talk like Christians, and behave like Christians; a person can be the nicest, the kindest, the gentlest individual you will ever meet, but if their life is

void of God's Word and faith in Christ Jesus, and they are merely trying to live the "pure-life tradition," and it's all in vain. "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And in vain they worship me, teaching teachings which are the commandments of people." It's just as foolish and useless as the Pharisee's tradition that they could not eat their meals except they practice a ceremonial washing of their hands and utensils to remove alleged ritualistic defilement from unknown contact with Gentiles.

Yet, as foolish and useless as that tradition was, there was a grain of ironic truth in it. None of the Pharisees—no one, in fact—can eat of the heavenly banquet except they wash—except they wash their robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14). No one is able to enter heaven unless they "are washed . . . sanctified . . . justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11). Heaven is not possible for us except that our hearts are "sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:22). Thus says the Lord!

The Word of God is clear that God Himself must do this washing just as He promises. God must cleanse us from our sins to make us ready and right for His heavenly kingdom. God gave us Jesus so that through His sacrificial death on the cross we would be made clean from our sins by the shedding of His blood. Though our sins were as scarlet, in Christ, they are whiter than snow (Ps. 51:7). We have been fully purified, as St. John writes, "The blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

The cleansing blood of Christ shed on the cross is applied to you personally in the purifying effects of Baptism. You have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through water and the Word. The Lord's baptismal water has washed away your sins,

making you holy and clean, right to stand before God in holiness and purity forever—the holiness and purity of Christ given to you through the waters of Baptism.

Baptism, then, is a source of great comfort to you and me, especially when we feel our sins and know that our living doesn't stand up to God's commandments. When we feel our sin, when we feel unworthy of God, our Baptism reminds us that God has come near to us. He has spoken to us by name in Baptism. God has claimed us, cleansed us, and put the saving mark of the cross on our head and on our heart.

Through our Baptism into Christ, we truly participate in the faith-filled, faithful living of the children of God empowered by the Holy Spirit through the Word. By grace through faith, we ever hold fast to the Word of God and His commands, living out our baptismal faith in our speaking and doing. Our Christian life is a result of God's cleansing us through Baptism and giving heaven to us as a free gift in Christ who died and rose for us. We live a pure and decent, God-fearing life of faith here on earth because of what God did for us in sending Jesus to be our Savior. Jesus is the One who makes us truly clean before God the Father. Christ has washed us so that we are now ready to eat with Him at His heavenly banquet table. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.