

**Mark 7:1-8** *Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup> (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders, <sup>4</sup> and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) <sup>5</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" <sup>6</sup> And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "' This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; <sup>7</sup> in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' <sup>8</sup> You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."*

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The Pharisees and the Scribes. Even the mention of their names can bring a sneer from a good bible believing Christian. They are the enemies of Jesus. They are the trouble makers. They are the farthest things from what we want to be.

And why exactly were they so troublesome to Jesus? Well, today in our text, Jesus tells us the heart of the problem these people, the religious elites of His day, had. Well, actually He tells them. He tells them that they worship Him with their lips but that their hearts are far from Him. He tells them that they follow the traditions of men over and against the commandments of God. So what is their overall problem? Their main problem was that while acting very religious, they were not religious in the true sense at all. Being religious is not about strictly following rules created by men, but rather about walking with God in His ways.

Jesus, in a section of our text that we did not read today, gave one example out of many that He could have brought as evidence of the sin of the Pharisees. He mentions the rule of Corban. Declaring something Corban in Jesus' day was declaring that it would be used for the work of God. The only problem was that you didn't actually have to hand it over at the time to be used. It was simply earmarked as such. But once anything was declared as Corban, it could not be used for any other purpose, even to fulfill obligations that person might have to others. And so many people abused this rule that had been passed down. Jesus specifically mentions the case of children declaring all of their property Corban and then failing to take care of their parents when they got older and were in a time of need. Those children would simply tell their parents, "There is nothing left to help you with. Everything has been declared Corban." You would think the religious leaders of the day would rebuke these children for not taking care of their parents as the commandments so clearly required. But

instead these religious leaders of the day were the ones demanding that not a cent of anything declared Corban be used for anything else.

And Jesus called a spade a spade. He told them such actions were evidence that they loved their own rules and traditions more than God's ways.

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So are we? How far are we from the Pharisees? Let me ask you a question today? What is it that you love about this church, St. Paul's? Seriously, think about it a little bit. Most of the time when I hear people talk about the things they love about this church, it is because we do things the old way. We still use the old hymnal. We read from the King James. We use the old catechism. We have not gone the way of those other churches.

But when we think about it these things we must ask again, "What is it about out this church that you love?" Is it that we hold to the traditions of men or that we walk in the ways of our God?

This is one of those sermons I could phrase very carefully in order to try not to ruffle any feathers. But as I studied the text this week, it was very evident that Jesus did not take this approach and so I will follow His lead.

There is nothing wrong with tradition. There is nothing wrong doing things the way they have always been done in the past. But there is everything wrong with falling in love with traditions and letting them become gods. There is everything wrong with letting tradition be the guide to all future actions.

And why is that? Because St. Paul's is not a museum of church history but rather a part of God Almighty's church with a rich history, a strong present, and a promising future so long as we walk in the ways of our God.

But let's be clear what this church must be about. It must be about the things of God, the ways of our Lord, and not simply about the preservation of old ways. For Avery and all the other young children in our

church do not simply need a place that looks a lot like what it looked like many years ago, but they need a place in which their faith can be nourished because we are walking after the ways of God.

If preserving of the old helps us to walk in the ways of God, we must keep the old. But if it gets in the way of walking in the ways of God, we must be willing to sacrifice it.

Sometimes we can get a false idea that the past was perfect because we no longer live in the past. We tend to idealize history and then demand a perfection that never truly existed. It seems that that is exactly what the Pharisees did in their day.

The Pharisees believed that every rule and every tradition that had been handed down to them from their elders was as good as gold, equal to or even superior to the scriptures. And for this attitude, they were rebuked. And lest we face the same rebuke, we must make sure that all of our actions and all of our decisions in this place are always truly based on understanding the ways of God through scripture and not merely on following the traditions of men. Lest while acting very religious, we too be judged as not truly religious at all.

As I studied this text and thought about where our church is today, I became convinced that I would be unfaithful today if I did not relate this text to our current look at bible translation. It is very appropriate that this text would come up as we are deciding what we should be using to hear God's Word. We must ask ourselves, when we are making decisions about bible translations in this church, if those decisions are being based on the traditions of men or the ways of God?

What is the difference? Is there any? Well, it depends. If you think that the King James Version is the only version that can be used in this church because that is the way it has always been, that is following the traditions of men. However, if you think that the King James Version is the best translation to make sure that people hear and understand the Word of God, that is following the ways of the Lord.

It is not the translation that you pick that decides whether you are sinfully following the traditions of men or whether you are faithfully walking in the ways of God. It truly comes down I suppose to why you pick it.

Do you pick it, whatever it is, out of a desire to allow the Word of God to be heard and understood and work in the hearts and minds of people as God makes clear is His will. Or do you pick it because it is the way that it has always been done?

We must be honest. “We have always done it that way” is at best one small step away from idolatry, from allowing tradition to become God and not the true God.

We must understand. Any idol brought up in the church can be destructive. The other extreme can be just as dangerous. If we simply change everything for the sake of change we have simply placed change on the altar and removed God. But in general, that is not our primary temptation here in this historic church.

This is not sermon to say, “Let’s get a new bible translation or let’s get a new hymnal or let’s throw away the old catechism.” This is a call to make all of those decisions by walking in the ways of God rather by simply clinging to the traditions of men that have been passed down to us. It is a call to make these all of those decisions with less affection for the past and with more affection for our Lord Jesus.

The goal of this church cannot be to simply sit atop the hill and not allow anything to change. It must be about accomplishing the will of God in our day. Sometimes that means we will have to hold on to the old with great vigor. Other times, it means that we will have to change. And yet there will be other times when either would be fine and we can act according to our preferences.

But we cannot be the Pharisees. We cannot allow our love for the way things have always been done to supplant the very words and commands of God.

Today we are called to confess our tendency to cling to the traditions of men as if they were the words of the Lord. For with confession comes forgiveness. Many of the Pharisees of Jesus’ day could never receive the forgiveness that Jesus wanted to give to them because they would never lay down their idols in confession. And that is the farthest thing from what we want to be.

No, we today must lay down our idols and confess them and cling instead to the one true God. For at His side is found forgiveness. At His side do we behold the cross and the empty tomb. At His side, His perfect ways become our ways.

We are not the Pharisees. We are the forgiven children of God by His grace. We live in that truth and we walk in His ways each day to His glory. Amen.