

INTRODUCTION

Part of this message is about traditions. Why do we do the things we do? Sometimes we do them because we've always done them the same way and we never questioned the reason. Growing up, I had exactly the same breakfast every morning: two fried eggs, bacon, grits, and toast. And the eggs were fried in the bacon grease. I don't eat that much anymore, but it's still my favorite breakfast.

And I still like it eat it the way I did growing up. I break up the bacon pieces and then I mix up the eggs and grits and bacon into a single pile that looks like a soupy mess. Do you know why I do that? Because my daddy fixed his eggs and grits and bacon the same way; he mixed it all up together. Later in life I asked my dad why he mixed up his eggs and bacon and grits. He said he did it because his daddy did it. And I asked, "Why did your daddy do it that way?" And my dad said, "Because he didn't have any teeth!" So that's why I still mix up my eggs, bacon, and grits—it's a family tradition!

In our passage today, we're going to see where Jesus tangled with some Jewish leaders who cherished tradition more than the Word of God.

Mark 7:1-13. "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.'" 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.'"

The Jews were very meticulous about obeying the multitude of laws in the Old Testament. The kosher laws had to do with the things that were clean and unclean. Some food was kosher, but certain foods weren't kosher and the Jews believed if they ate them, they would be defiled. I wouldn't be a good Jew, because they can't eat catfish, shrimp, or pork. But you may be surprised to learn that grasshoppers, crickets, and locusts are considered kosher.

Jesus' disciples weren't eating with dirty hands, so kids; you still need to wash your hands before you eat. They were criticized because they didn't follow the ceremonial hand washing ritual the Jews practiced.

The Jews had the Old Testament Law, called the Torah. The most important laws were the Ten Commandments. But there were hundreds of other rules. But over the centuries the Jewish rabbis added thousands more rules and regulations. This was called the Oral Law, and it was passed down from generation to generation. It was eventually written down into a book called The Mishnah. Jesus' didn't recognize or obey these oral laws and this became a setting for Jesus to give us some important truth about tradition, righteousness, and sin. Let's learn four important truths:

1. THERE IS DANGER IN REPLACING GOD'S TRUTH WITH MAN'S TRADITIONS

Jesus used turned the Jew's criticism into an opportunity to warn them that they had elevated the traditions of man above the Word of God. He pointed out a religious and legal "loophole" the Jews had created called Corban. The Ten Commandments taught that we must honor our father and mothers. That means as long as our parents are alive, we are to honor them and to take care of them. But the Jewish mafia created this loophole by which a Jewish man could say, "I'm devoting all my assets to the Temple." And he made small down payment to the priests. Then he continued to live on his income. And if his elderly parents said, "Son, we need some financial help, he could say, 'Sorry, mom and dad, all my money is devoted to the Temple.'" And Jesus said this tradition made a mockery of the Word of God.

He said, "Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that." (Mark 7:13) And the Jews had many more of these tedious oral laws. For instance, if a Jewish man was carrying a pot and it was touched by a Gentile, that pot had to be broken into pieces and the largest piece of broken pottery couldn't be any larger than a man's big toe. Can't you just see a Pharisee breaking a pot and then holding the broken pieces next to his big toe to make sure he pleased God?

The Jews aren't the only ones who have replaced the Word of God with traditions; Christians have as well. For the first 1,500 years of the Christian church, there were thousands of rules and regulations that developed in the Roman Catholic Church and later in the Eastern Orthodox Church. It's important to understand that a very important doctrine developed in the Catholic Church called Papal Infallibility. That taught that when the Pope spoke "ex-cathedra," (from the chair) his proclamation was held as authoritative as the Bible itself.

Then in the 1500s a group of Christians protested the authority of the Pope. They were called Protestants, and their defining doctrine was Sola Scriptura, scripture alone.

But even the Protestants developed their own traditions. For instance, John Calvin was the founder of the Presbyterian Church, which was also known as the Church of Scotland. John Calvin always wore a hat to church and only removed it to pray. So for several hundred years men in the Presbyterian Church wore hats in church and removed them only to pray. But according to biographers, the reason John Calvin wore a hat was because his church in

Strasbourg was open and cold. There were many pigeons that roosted in the church, and there was always danger of being bombed by the pigeons. Hopefully, it wouldn't happen during prayers. But to be safe, they wore the hats for the rest of the service.

But lest you think I'm picking on the Catholics and the Presbyterians, I think Baptists have more unbiblical traditions than anyone else. I grew up hearing that it was a sin for Baptists to dance. Believe me, I've seen them and some Baptists can't dance, but some can. When I attended Samford University, a Baptist university in Birmingham, I was in a singing group and we really moved around a lot but our director didn't call it dancing; he called it "sacred liturgical movement." Trust me, we were dancing; and some people thought we were sinning.

I grew up hearing that Baptists don't play cards either—it's the devil's game. In one church I served in Alabama the minister of education was trying to ask people to bring card tables for a fellowship, but he refused to call them card tables. He said, "Please bring your square portable tables with foldable legs." I'm convinced it was a group of Baptists who invented the domino game of 42. It's a card game, but you're using dominos instead of cards.

When I first came to serve at pastor of Green Acres in 1991, I wouldn't dare enter the pulpit without a coat and tie. It was one of our traditions that you had to "dress up" to come to church. You had to put on your very best for the Lord. But if that was the case, why didn't the men all wear tuxedos and the women wear expensive evening gowns? There's nothing wrong with dressing up to come to church, but one of the things I used to hear from people is, "I can't come to Green Acres because I don't have nice enough clothes to wear there." There's nothing wrong with dressing up for church but when it becomes a requirement you have substituted a tradition of man for the Word of God. By the way, how many of you don't like the fact that I'm wearing jeans today? Don't raise your hand. But ask yourself why that upsets you. Is it because of your religious tradition, or because of the Word of God?

2. RELIGIOUS PRACTICES WILL NEVER MAKE US ACCEPTABLE TO GOD

The reason we like traditions, whether it's washing your hands or dressing up for church, is that it is something we can do outwardly and feel good about ourselves. Jesus taught that righteousness wasn't a matter of outward religious practice; it is a matter of inward affection toward God.

Jesus called the Jews hypocrites. They honored God with their lips but their hearts were far from God. The word "hypocrite" comes from a word that meant "an actor." A hypocrite is someone whose walk doesn't match his talk.

A few years ago, Nike produced a commercial you might not remember, because although they spent a lot of money producing it, the commercial only ran for a few days. The commercial was filmed in Africa. A group of Zulu warriors were wearing Nike basketball shoes as they were jumping around. These Zulus had an amazing vertical leap. Rock music played as they jumped in these shoes. And then the camera focused on one of the warriors who said something in his Bantu dialect, "Nike Buka buka buka." And the words that came up on the screen for the translation had him saying, "Nike. Just do it!" You may wonder, "What's wrong with that?"

After the commercial had aired a few times, a college professor who spoke Bantu called Nike and informed them that what the Zulu warrior actually said was, "These Nike shoes hurt my feet!" The message Nike wanted to get out didn't match what the man was saying.

The problem with religion is that it is man's attempt earn God's acceptance by following a prescribed set of rules and regulations. God gave the Old Testament Law to actually show us that none of us can obey His rules.

According to Revelation 20, one day in the future, all lost people will be stand before Jesus at the Great White Throne Judgment. The Bible says books will be opened. One book will be the Book of Life. For those of us who have been redeemed, our names appear in the Lamb's Book of Life. But Revelation 20 is a judgment for lost people and the Bible says they will be judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. All of these people are going to plead before Jesus. They will want to say, "Look at all the good works that I did! I did many more good works than bad. I wasn't a bad person. I was a better person than all those hypocrites at Green Acres Church!" Others will says, "Lord, Lord in your name I did many wonderful religious acts!" But here's the nature of God's Law. If you break only one single law, according to James 2:10, you are guilty of breaking ALL the law. So God gave the Law so no person would be able to plead innocence or ignorance of the law.

Here's how the Bible describes it: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law." (Romans 3:19-20)

So how many people will be declared righteous by performing religious acts? Zero. How many mouths will be able to give an excuse for their behavior? Zero. How many of us will be held accountable to God? All of us. So with this truth, Jesus moves on to address the true nature of sin and righteousness and it has nothing to do with the way you wash your hands or whether you eat catfish or not.

3. WE SIN BECAUSE WE'RE BORN WITH A BAD HEART

The Bible says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9) There are two basic schools of thought about human goodness and evil. A humanist says all people are basically good at heart, but because of a lack of education, or poverty, or a poor environment, or association with bad people, a person gradually falls into evil. The other position is that man is basically born with a sinful nature and must be redeemed by Jesus Christ. Of course, that is position the Bible teaches.

We're not breaking bad; we're born bad to the bone. You can put a three-year-old toddler on the floor with a bag of candy. And you can then let two or three other toddlers approach him. Is he going to say, "Here, let me share my candy with you?" Nope. He's going to grab it and say, "Mine!" You'll never see a class in any school entitled Lying 101. Nobody has to teach us to lie. We lie naturally. We have to be taught to tell the truth.

The English Playwright and comedian, Noël Coward, once played a practical joke. He sent an anonymous letter to 10 of the most influential people in London. The letter said, "We all know what you have done. If you don't want to be exposed, leave town." Of course, it was just a joke, but Noël Coward said all 10 individuals moved within six months. If we could dig into each of our lives, we would see the evidence that we're all sinners.

Jesus used this occasion about clean and unclean traditions to teach us the source of human sin. "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.'" After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. 'Are you so dull?' he asked. 'Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.' (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.") He went on: 'What comes out of a man is what 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.'" (Mark 7:14-23)

Of course, when Jesus spoke about the evil that comes from the human heart, He wasn't talking about the organ in your chest that pumps blood to every part of your body. He was referring to the heart as the "control center" of your life. Your heart is the part of your personality where moral choices are made.

This week I read in the Tyler Paper about a woman who is in jail charged with intoxication manslaughter charges. Last July she was driving a vehicle where her 5-year-old granddaughter was a passenger. The Tahoe she was driving left the road and slammed into a tree. Officers at the crash scene reported a strong smell of alcohol. Her granddaughter died from her injuries, and while the driver was in ICU, her blood was drawn and she had twice the legal limit of alcohol. In addition she had Xanax and marijuana in her system. When told there was a warrant for her arrest, she was rude and showed no remorse for her behavior. Even after the crash and before she was arrested, this lady used her Facebook page to post information about drinking games involving alcohol. The arresting officer was quoted as saying he found it bothersome that after her wreck and the death of her granddaughter she was still posting information about a drinking game.

Experts would say this woman has a drinking or a drug problem; and she does. But those are only symptoms of a bigger problem—a heart problem. It wasn't the alcohol, Xanax, and marijuana she took into her mouth that led to the death of her granddaughter. It was because she has a wicked heart that led to that behavior. And we're all born with the same wicked heart.

4. SALVATION INVOLVES GETTING A NEW HEART

That's the bad news, but it's only the bad news that makes the good news so good. If I said to you, "Your house isn't on fire," you'd probably look at me like I was crazy. But what if I said, "I saw smoke in your neighborhood and saw a fire truck speeding down your street, but your house isn't on fire?" You'd say, "Whew! That's good news."

The bad news is that we're all sinners bound for hell. The good news is that Jesus died on the cross so that we could receive a spiritual heart-transplant. God doesn't want to patch up your old heart. He wants to give you a new one. God spoke through the Prophet Ezekiel to show us that sinful humanity's only hope is to get a new heart. God promises, "I'll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you. I'll remove the stone heart from your body and replace it with a heart that's God-willed, not self-willed." (Ezekiel 36:26 MSG)

Jesus told the hyper-religious Pharisee Nicodemus that he would never be good enough to see the kingdom of heaven. He said, "You must be born again." And when you are born again, spiritually, God gives you a new start on life—and it includes a new heart. The Bible says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Would you like a new heart today? Jesus has a heart full of grace and forgiveness and He offers to become a permanent resident in your heart. Salvation isn't a matter of the head; you can't think your way into heaven. Salvation isn't a matter of your hands; you can't work your way into heaven. It's a matter of the heart. And God is offering you salvation a free gift. But it's not cheap; in fact it cost Jesus everything. In John 19 we read that as Jesus was dying on the cross a Roman soldier pierced his side with a spear and water and blood flowed out from the wound of Jesus. That indicated that the literal heart of Jesus had burst. He died of a broken heart so we can have a new heart. The old hymn says, "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins; And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains." The third verse says, "Dear dying lamb, Thy precious blood shall never lose its power. Till all the ransomed church of God be saved to sin no more!"

CONCLUSION

I don't often conclude a message with a poem, but I found one that's so classical and sophisticated, I can't resist. The original comes from an unknown author, but I've changed it enough to make it even classier.

Mary had a little pig
Whose skin was white as snow,
That is after Mary washed her pig,
Which was often, you must know.

And Mary had an awful time
To keep her piggy clean.
For he really was the dirtiest pig
That you have ever seen.

She'd wash him and she'd scrub him,
And he would squirm and squeal,
As if he tried to let her know
That clean was not his deal.

And then outside in his backyard,
He'd scheme from morn to night;
Then he'd sneak away from home
And lose himself from sight.

And then when Mary found him,
He'd be dirtier than before
So she would grab the soap and brush
And clean her pig some more.

Poor Mary thought and wondered much
What she could ever do;
Until she figured out a plan,
And this she carried through.

She took her pig to a local Vet
Who put the pig to sleep,
He took the pig's heart right out,
But not of course to keep.

And then he took a dying lamb
And took his heart out too
And put it in the little pig
Before the piggy knew.

When little piggy did awake
He had no more desire
To wallow in the mud again
Or ever in the mire.

And try as hard as he could think
He never understood
How such a dirty pig as him
Could ever be so good.

And so you see, dear friend of mine
You need a new heart too
Just like the little piggy did;
The old will never do.

So if you want a brand new heart;
Well, here is what you do;
Just give your heart to the Lamb of God;
Ad He'll give His heart to you.

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes