

God's Word? Tradition?

Mark 7:1-7

When you visit London, England, there is a place that you have to visit. That place is Westminster Abbey, which is quite famous. However, there is an episode that occurred a long time ago with a visitor to Westminster Abbey that I'd like to share with you this morning.

One day there were visitors at the abbey and a guide led them through a tour. The guide explained to the visitors the abbey's history and the faithful heroes who passed away a long time ago. Also, he made a long-winded explanation about what kind of programs they had to manage the abbey. After his explanation, the guide asked the visitors if they had any questions or comments. At this point, a lady from Ohio asked the guide a question. This question remains famous until even today.

"Thank you for the excellent explanation about Westminster Abbey. But, I have a question for you. How many people have been saved in this temple recently?"

The guide was caught off-guard by the unexpected question. Even though this abbey had a long tradition, it remains a relic of the past without any salvation in it. This episode brings up a very important question – "What about our faith?"

I want to ask each of you, is your faith a relic of the past where you can only see it at a museum or is it being used to change the world? Our faith is not something that we should speak of in a past tense. It is happening in the here and now as we experience the living God. Tradition is important, but we need to know that we can lose our faith if we grasp at only our traditions.

Today's scripture reading brings up this kind problem in our faith life. In the text, Jesus felt pity for the Pharisees who had a very formal faith. In verse 1 it says, "The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem." (Mark 7:1) The phrase, 'The Pharisees and some of the teachers from Jerusalem' means that they are from the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin thought that Jesus' teachings were not inline with Jewish tradition. So they sent some people to investigate whether it was true or not. One of the things that they saw was that some of Jesus' disciples ate food without washing their hands. This became a serious issue. They protested by saying, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?" (Mark 7:5) 'Tradition of the elders' means that it is a rule that makes their life perfect through the law of the LORD.

For example, the Ten Commandments orders, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." However, the Bible doesn't tell us how to keep the Sabbath day holy. So people make rules like: we can't walk more than a few miles, we can't lift heavy things, we can't start a fire because it is a form of work, etc. The Pharisees emphasized the tradition of the elders rather than the Word of God. Pharisees also emphasized unessential things rather than those that are essential in life. Jesus felt pity about these facts. Today, we should concern ourselves with standing in front of

the Word of God, not whether we follow our traditions or formalities.

First, traditions or formalities can estrange us from God.

The fatal flaw in a tradition is that it is empty on the inside. When you look at verses 3-4, it explains the purity rules that the Jews lived by. There are many purity rules, but in this text, the rules as they apply to eating food are pointed out. According to the tradition of the elders, people must wash their hands before eating their food. This hand-washing rule originally came from priests who entered the temple. Since the priest entered the temple to worship God in a holy and pure condition, they had to wash their hands whenever they entered the temple. These habits about being holy and pure have been emphasized by people in general, not just the priests. So the rule of washing your hands before eating has been passed on.

I have a question for you, “Which is more important – washing your hands or living a holy life?” Pretty simple isn’t it? Of course, an important and essential thing for us is to have holy worship and a holy life. However, living a holy life disappeared and simply washing your hands before eating became more important. So eating without washing your hands is the same as committing a sin.

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees who followed religious traditions or formalities. What did Jesus say to them? Verse 6 says, “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.’” (Mark 7:6) Jesus quoted the word of the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 29:13) to show that the Pharisees are hypocrites. A hypocrite is one that emphasizes the outside appearance while disregarding the inside. We all look like good worshipers on the surface. We all look like good Christians. But Jesus rebukes us that our mind is far from God. So we should know this today, Jesus judges us by our faith that is God-centered, not by our following of religious rules.

Korean culture emphasizes almost the same kind of traditions and formalities. It may be due to the influence of Confucianism on our culture. Confucianism contributed a lot to the development of Korea’s society. However, there are many negative effects that Confucianism has had on Korea’s society. One of the negative effects is an empty life that is created by spending resources to take care of external needs rather than addressing internal needs. For instance, the negative effect made by people who buy big cars. They thought that by buying a bigger car they made themselves better than others who had smaller cars.

Our faith life may tend to go the same way. People who attend church for a very long time, as well as a church that has a long history, can be bound by particular traditions. I am not saying that tradition in and of itself is wrong. But if we only hold on to tradition, we are likely to be past-oriented. We will always say, “We’ve always done things around here like that...” It means we can lose our vision. If we continuously repeat our formalities, we will probably misunderstand what the formality was to represent. These traditions and formalities can become an obstacle to us as we forget the more important and essential elements. That is the Pharisees’ misunderstanding as well.

Second, we must remember that the dangerous potential exists for traditions and rules to replace God's Word.

Sometime we think that God is happy because we kept our traditions or rules. I'll give you some examples. During a worship service, we devote ourselves to God as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to Him. However, some people think that attending worship service is enough. Additionally, they think that as long as they get to church before the sermon starts, there wasn't a problem. We should all know that attending only worship services is not enough. We should be able to meet God during worship services. It is important that the Holy Spirit comes to us, touches our souls, and changes our lives through worship services.

Another example is a cross on a pulpit. The cross is a symbol of Christianity. However, the cross itself is not the truth. We should not misunderstand that the cross itself has a spiritual power. Originally, a cross was a symbol of death. The reason why the cross became a symbol of Christianity was that Jesus died on the cross. Jesus became a living sacrifice by dying on the cross to save us from our sins. If we don't have any confessions to the cross, it means nothing to us. It will end up just being a shape.

Simply washing our hands before eating does not make us holy. We can't say, "I became a holy person because I washed my hands." Washing hands before eating is important, but it is not the truth. The truth would be having a holy worship and a pure life. However, the Pharisees stipulated washing hands as the truth. So Jesus said to His disciples, "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.'" (Mark 7:15) Hands that have been washed or not washed cannot decide holiness. The important thing is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean'.

Finally, traditions can even destroy the Word of God.

That means that tradition can break God's Word. We can find a good example from the Catholic Church. Catholic priests cannot marry. This is a Catholic tradition from a long time ago when Peter was the first Pope. But there is a problem because Peter got married. Because of Catholic tradition, which says that priests cannot marry, they removed the story about Peter's mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14-15, Mark 1:30-31, Luke 4:38-39). They changed the Bible because of their tradition.

How can we keep our faith life without traditions or formalities? There is only one way. That is when we meet Jesus Christ again newly each time. We can't beat this world through traditions or formalities. Jesus Christ is more important than any tradition or formality known to man. The essential and enduring tenet of the law of God is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the law. The Old Testament is the foundation of Jesus. However, the Pharisees couldn't see Jesus Christ, who was standing in front of them, as their Savior. They were too busy arguing about washing their hands. They were excited about and shouted for unessential issues, but they didn't know exactly whom Jesus was.

There's a story about a son who is in his forties, as he tries to explain to his mother why he doesn't want to go to church:

Korean United Methodist Church at San Antonio
Sermon by Pastor Daesub Han

1. He wants to sleep late.
2. He doesn't want to hear the choir's discord.
3. The elder's prayer is too long.

Then the mother told her son why he had to go to church:

1. Church is the place where we meet God, not people.
2. Worship is a requirement for a Christian life, not a choice.
3. You are the senior pastor of the church.

It is likely that our faith life has become linked to formalities and relics of the past. Because we can fall into that trap, we can become bored in our Christian life and we don't know how to change our lives. Why is that? It is because we follow traditions with no recognition. We don't know why, but we emphasize only the formalities. Traditions or formalities cannot change this world. Dead faith cannot change this world either.

The early church in Jerusalem was able to experience God's power. After the Pentecost, the disciples who had experienced God's power influenced the entire city of Jerusalem. However, the Jerusalem church began to decline rapidly after that. The reason is that they were controlled by traditions and formalities. The Jerusalem church spread the Word of God by oppression, placing emphasis on the law, and circumcision. But the Thessalonian church was much different. They had an active faith. They kept their work, which was produced by faith and their labor was prompted by love. The Thessalonian church could beat this world and spread the gospel even though it was a very tough time. Living faith can change the world. We don't need anymore traditions.

Today, you and I should meet Jesus Christ by truly getting over traditions and formalities. We must become a faithful Christian that is going together with Jesus Christ. I pray that you and I will follow God's Word and enjoy Jesus Christ who is at the center of the Word of God.