

## **Traditions of Men – Or Commandments of God?**

*“For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders.” (Mark 7:3-8)*

Charles Coats

When we think of what we like in life, it would be correct to say that for the most part we want things our own way. This is especially true in matters of religion. There are almost as many viewpoints concerning religion as there are people. People like a religion that serves them, and not one that requires them to be servants.

Few people really want to follow the Bible. Religious groups have popped up everywhere based on such “grand” thinking as, “I think”, “I believe”, “I feel”, and “I don’t think God would”. Man’s religious views are emotionally driven. It does not matter what God has said. It only matters what makes people feel good and what gives them an emotional high. When asked why they believe what they do or attend where they attend, the usual response is something along the lines of “I like it”. Not too long ago, I was talking to a young lady about where she attended, and she liked it because of all the activities they had for the kids, including the bands. It was a highly charged emotional experience. Never once did she quote anything out of the Bible to show that where she was worshiping was where she ought to be.

From the world, we have come to expect such things. They usually do not care much about God anyway. However, we should not expect these kind of things from our brethren. Yet, even in the church, people want to make our worship a “more meaningful experience” – or, to say it honestly, make our worship a more emotional experience. For many, worshiping the way God has taught us in his word, and studying the Bible is old fashioned and will not work to reach people today.

Rather than sing, pray, give of our means, preach, and take the Lord’s Supper and do so reverently, many now want to clap their hands and stomp their feet as they sing. They want the preaching to be “relevant” to our times giving us a social gospel but not the truth of God’s word. People want to sing or hum during the Lord’s Supper, supposedly to make it more meaningful, as though, reverently thinking about the death of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 11:26) is not enough to make the Lord’s Supper meaningful to us.

This type of thinking that has moved us away from the commandments of God to the traditions of men is nothing new. A careful study of the Bible will show several occasions where God’s people walked after the teachings of man. A look at our own history helps us to know how far many have drifted away from God.

In Mark 7:6-9, Jesus warns us about following the traditions of men. Besides being that which is opposed to following God, following the teachings of men puts us in an awful quandary. Exactly whose teaching do we follow? Which man is right? They cannot all be, because in most cases they contradict one another. Why should you and I follow one person and not another? What standard do we use to decide which belief to follow? If we follow the teachings of men, we cannot appeal to the Bible as our authority. We cannot have both God and the world (Matthew 6:24). It

is no wonder that many people are confused about religion. We try to say that everyone is right, when in reality, we know that they cannot be. Confusing? Absolutely.

In this lesson, we want to examine what Jesus teaches us in Mark 7:6-9. It must be remembered that in this context, Jesus is not talking to those in the world. He is talking to those who are supposed to be the people of God. It is they who taught for doctrine the commandments of men. I would ask the question, “Were these people pleasing to God?” Let us examine the text to answer this question.

The first word Jesus uses to describe them is hypocrite (Mark 7:6). This is not an unusual word to describe the Jews, because they professed to be the people of God yet followed the teachings of men. Seven times in Matthew 23, Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites (verses 13,14,15,23,25,27,29).

They were acting out a part but were not being what they pretended to be (The word hypocrite comes from a word that means an “actor”. One who plays someone he is not.). Jesus describes them as outwardly appearing to be righteous, yet inwardly they were full of hypocrisy and iniquity (Matthew 23:28). Like these Jews, there are many Christians today who are claiming to be children of God, but are not following the teachings of God.

Jesus says that these people honored God with their lips (Mark 7:6). They talked a good talk but they did not live for God. They did not put their talk into action. In James 3:9,10, James shows us the hypocrisy of just giving lip service to God. With the same mouth we bless God, and curse man who is made in the image of God. John, in 1 John 4:20, teaches us that if we hate our brother, we cannot say we love God. Too many Christians think they will be able to go to Heaven as long as they profess a belief in God, yet they do not keep his commandments.

Many Christians sing the songs, pray the prayers, talk about how a Christian should live, talk about how we should always defend the truth, and often will tell us how good a Christian they are. Yet, as we all know, talk is cheap! What kind of life do we live when we are away from the worship assembly? If all we are doing is honoring God with our lips, we will be lost.

Of those in Mark 7, Jesus said that even though they honored God with their lips, their heart was far from God (Mark 7:6). This is significant, since everything about us is directed by where our heart is. As we think in our hearts, so are we (Proverbs 23:7). It is out of the abundance of the heart that man speaks (Matthew 12:34).

Where our allegiance is will also tell everyone where our heart is (Matthew 6:19-21). Our heart directs where we lay up our treasures. If Heaven is where our heart is, then we will do whatever it takes to make it to Heaven. If this world is where our heart is, then we will do everything so we can gain here in this life. People around us will know if our hearts belong to God by how we live, how we speak, and if we serve God.

We are to serve God with all our heart (Matthew 22:37). Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:3) did not have hearts that were right with God, and they were struck dead. Simon, the sorcerer, allowed his heart to be turned from God and he was told to repent or he would be lost (Acts 8:21). We must

be people whose hearts are pricked so they will be receptive to the gospel (Acts 2:37). We must have good and honest hearts (Luke 8:15).

We cannot be far from God and expect to live with him. If our hearts are not totally given to God (Matthew 6:33), we will not be pleasing to him and therefore lost. God will not accept part-time Christianity.

In Mark 7:7, Jesus states that these people worshipped him in vain. The term “vain” means “folly, to no purpose”. This would make their worship to be empty and meaningless. It is easy to understand why their worship was vain, when we look at verses 7 and 8:

1. They taught for doctrines the commandments of men. Like many today, they do not have any scripture to back up what they do, but what they do is right because they say it is. And, they do not want anyone to question them.
2. They laid aside the commandment of God. When people want to have things their way, they will ignore, misinterpret, or misuse scripture. They do not want to follow the Bible to the letter of the law. They want us to think the Bible is outdated, and therefore we need to listen to what man (especially them personally) has to say.
3. They held the traditions of men. Because they listened to what man had to say and did not listen to what God had to say, their worship was vain worship.

How tragic it is today that so many fail to learn from what Jesus has taught us. How many today think they do not have to follow all that God has said, and yet they think they are going to go to Heaven?

They wanted their religion to please themselves, regardless of whether it pleased God. They taught what they wanted, whether it came from the Bible or not. How true this is today, both within and without the church. Consider the following:

1. It is obvious that a whole lot of people do not believe that we have to attend every service of God's people. They have rationalized their absences so they can still feel good about themselves. Yet, it is still the case that God did not tell us to not forsake just the Sunday A.M. service, but to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Hebrews 10:25). Should we believe God or man?
2. Sadly, we are beginning to hear those who claim to be Christians say that it is not necessary for one to be baptized in order to be saved. They have taken this view to try to get people saved who are members of denominations, usually their friends or their families. But, God said that it is baptism that saves us (1 Peter 3:21; Mark 16:16). Should we believe God or man?
3. Some would say that it does not matter if we use the fruit of the vine and unleavened bread at the Lord's Supper. To these people, any element will work. Paul, in his instructions to the Corinthians, specifically taught them that which Jesus did the night

he was betrayed when he instituted the Lord's Supper. Jesus used the fruit of the vine and the unleavened bread (1 Corinthians 11:24-26). Again, do we believe God or man?

4. Some will say that it is acceptable to use the mechanical instrument of music in singing praises to God, whether in public worship or in a private setting. Others will say that it would be wrong in public worship, but right in a private setting. More and more congregations are offering two services – a traditional one (normally without the musical instrument) and a contemporary one (normally with the musical instrument). Even though man has a lot of ideas, God still said that we are to SING to him (Ephesians 5:19) when we praise him in song. Who are we to believe – God or man?
5. It is becoming more and more common to hear people talk about the church as though it is just another denomination. People want to believe that those in the denominations (or least some of them) are Christians. They want to think that we can cooperate with the denominations and be acceptable to God. God taught us that there is only one church (Ephesians 4:4). The saved are in this church (Ephesians 5:23; Acts 2:47). And, that only this church will be delivered up to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24). Do we believe man or God?
6. Many Christians do not want to obey the elders. So, they argue that elders have no authority. God, though, tells us to submit ourselves to the elders and that the elders have the rule over us (Hebrews 13:7,17). Is it God or man that we should follow?
7. Of course, as humans, we sometimes tell ourselves that we can hold a grudge against a brother and that this behavior is acceptable. We are taught by God to not let the Sun go down on our anger (Ephesians 4:26) and if we have a problem with a brother to go to him and reconcile the problem (Matthew 5:23-25). Do we really believe it is acceptable to God to hold a grudge against our brother? Man says, Yes. God says, No. Which one should we believe?

We could easily continue on with what man says as opposed to what God says, but suffice it say that we often do not think about what we are doing, and therefore fail to recognize that we could be doing something that is not authorized by God. When we think about it, how often do we do those things which man says are acceptable, yet God says are not acceptable to him?

What happens when we follow the traditions of men and not the commandments of God? When we review our study, we see that following the traditions of men makes us the following:

1. Hypocrites.
2. Those who lay aside the commandments of God.
3. Those who reject the commandments of God.

None of these are favorable to our cause. Any one of these will cause us to be lost, but when follow men rather than God, we have all three conditions.

But what about following the commandments of God? What conditions persist if we make this our life? Note the following:

1. We receive entrance into the Kingdom (Matthew 7:21).
2. We will have the power of God to salvation (Romans 1:16).
3. We will have that which will save our souls (James 1:21).
4. We will have that which will endure forever (1 Peter 1:25).

While following the traditions of men will cause us to be lost, following the commandments of God will cause us to be saved.

We do not want to end up like the rich man in Luke 16:19ff who lifted up his eyes in torments. He had the opportunity to obey God, and he wasted his life. We want to be like those who followed God's word and were described as men and women of faith (Hebrews 11).

Of those who follow the traditions of men, Jesus said, "*Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition*" (Mark 7:9). To these he will also say, "*...I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity*" (Matthew 7:23).

Of those who follow the commandments of God, the Bible says, "*Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city*" (Revelation 22:14). The contrast in statements is important. Those who follow the traditions of men will be rejected at Judgment. Those who follow the commandments of God will be saved. This being the case, should we follow the teachings of men or the teachings of God? Maybe the real question is this, "Do we want to be lost or saved?"