

## Written Copy: Mark 7:5-9 “Beneficial Traditions in Christ”

Proper 16: 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday @ Pentecost

Sunday, August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2024

### Text: Mark 7:5-9

<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." <sup>9</sup> And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!"

### Exegetical Statement

The Pharisees think they are holier and right with God because of their hand-washing tradition. But they do this from hypocritical hearts that are turned away from God as the source of our right standing and instead are turned upon themselves, so much so that they condemn the very One who came to embody and fulfill the law for them. In their false piety they are actually rejecting the commandments of God by following their false righteous traditions, and their hearts have wandered far away from the LORD and the true fulfillment of His commandments which are found in obedient love for God and love for fellow man. Jesus has come to call them back to true right standing with God through faith in Him and His righteous work of salvation for all mankind, so that men might once again worship and live in faith toward Him.

### Focus Statement:

Christ came to do wonder upon wonder in our hearts and lives. His words of law point out how our traditions and works to earn righteousness stand against salvation by grace through faith. Then He came to earn that right standing for us through His mighty works: His suffering, death, and resurrection. Through His gift of baptism all our sinful works are washed to the cross and to the tomb, separated forever. And by faith He gives to us the credit He earned through all His perfect righteous works.

### Function Statement:

#### Why it's important to know:

Our sinful hearts want to have control over earning right standing with God. We want our traditions and piety to earn favor with Him. We can use them to elevate ourselves over our fellow Christians. In doing so we can become blind and deaf to the biblical doctrine that none are good in the eyes of God, and that salvation and right standing comes from Him alone.

#### What the hearer should do as a result:

See our traditions and practices that are not spoken against in Scripture as useful when they point us and center us on salvation in Christ by grace through faith alone.

### Subject Sentence: Baptismal Faith in Christ Makes Traditions Worthy

## Introduction

In our Gospel Lesson from **Mark 7:8-9** **8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.** **9 And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!**

It certainly sounds like Jesus has a problem with traditions. Should that trouble us as Lutherans? Well, we certainly have our share of them. One of them you can see with your own eyes as you look at my stole: it's green. And the altar paraments and those attached to the baptismal font are green also. Why is that? Because we are a Church that follows the liturgical tradition of observing different seasons of the Church Year. We are in the Season After Pentecost, when the focus is on Jesus' work through the Holy Spirit to teach and grow His Church. The color we use is green since it represents growth. Each season of the Church Year that we observe focuses on some part of Jesus coming and His ministry. The next Season of the Church year is Advent, when we focus on the coming and promise of our King of Kings, both on Christmas as well as on the Last Day. The season of Epiphany focuses on Jesus revealing Himself to be both Divine God and man at the same time. Lent is the season where we prepare our hearts to receive our crucified and risen Savior through repentant faith. Observing these traditions are good in that they allow us to focus on different aspects of Jesus life and mission through Scripture.

There is another tradition that we observed at the beginning of our worship service. We began it with the Invocation, which is a traditional way of beginning worship in the Lutheran Church. That is a useful one as it reminds us of and clearly states to one another who this God is that we have gathered to worship, He is the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And then some of you, when I said the Invocation, made the sign of the cross on your chest. That's a tradition that reminds us of our baptism, where we were baptized into the name of the Triune God.

Following that we participated in another tradition: Corporate Confession and Absolution. When we recognize and confess that the Triune God is really and truly present among us, as with other people in Scripture such as Isaiah, when confronted with His real presence of God, we confess who we are before Him, sinful and unclean people. But then, just as with Isaiah, the LORD extends His hand of forgiveness to you through the words of Absolution that I spoke.

All of these traditions are useful and healthy for us as we come before our Triune God to worship Him and receive His gifts as His assembled Church. But could they ever become the problem that Jesus points out regarded the Pharisees' hand washing?

## How Traditions Can Become a Problem

There certainly wasn't anything inherently sinful in washing the hands. After all, many of us do that before we eat. It's good hygiene. It prevents us from getting sick. This was not a washing that included soap in order to wash away dirt however. This was a ceremonial washing where they would use a closed fist dipped in water to wash the arm from the elbow all the way down to the knuckles. It symbolized the need to be cleansed and pure before God. The problem with the Pharisees wasn't what they were doing as much as why they were doing it

The problem was that they believed this was happening by their own action. They believed that by following this ritual they were earning God's favor. And there was another problem too. Because they followed this tradition and some of the disciples did not the Pharisees saw themselves as being better than them, more holy than them. In fact, they would go so far as to say that since these disciples, and Jesus too, because they didn't follow these traditions that had been passed down from generation to generation, made God angry with them, and that they stood outside His favor, His kingdom. They considered Jesus and His disciples unforgiven sinners.

Nowhere in Scripture did God command hand washing as a means to be right with Him and receive His favor. The Pharisees had taken a tradition developed by man and made it equal to the commandments of God. And even worse had made it something that one could do that earned right standing with Him. And on top of this made others feel guilty for not doing it.

Could we ever be guilty of the same thing with our traditions? We follow "Traditional Worship" where we for the most part follow the liturgy laid out in one of the Divine Services in our LSB hymnal. By liturgy I refer to those things that I say to you on behalf of Jesus, and how you respond back. An example of this is how at the end of the Gospel Reading I say, "This is the Gospel of the Lord", and you respond back "Praise to You, O Christ." These are good and useful in that they organize our service in the flow of coming into God's presence and having a dialog with Him where He speaks to us, and we respond back to Him. And those things we respond back are drawn from Scripture itself. After all, there is no better thing to say than what God has already said to us.

But not all Lutheran Churches follow the liturgy. There are those that use Contemporary Worship where there may be little or no established liturgy. It can be mainly the Pastor speaking with very limited responses from the Congregation. And what is spoken by the Pastor and the congregation is more conversational in nature as opposed to the formalistic nature of Traditional liturgy. Those that like this form of worship would say its more genuine and from the heart. The hymns tend to be more reflective in nature and set to modern music aimed at connecting emotionally with the younger generation. They would say this kind of worship makes them feel more uplifted and closer to God than the liturgy we use that has been around for many generations.

Those who prefer Traditional Worship would counter by saying their liturgy and their hymns are time tested. The hymns are more Scripturally based, often quoting passages of Scripture. In this sense they are more God speaking to us then us reflection back to God what His word and our faith means in our life. These are hymns with music and words that they grew up with, and therefore have their own emotional attachment to those who have sung them throughout the years.

Each has its benefits. So how might this become a problem in our day? When we become Pharisees about worship styles. The LORD never commanded one worship style over another, or one kind of musical style over another. What matters is that what they lead us to say and confess is based on the truth from Scripture. In the book of Acts where it describes the Church there are four elements: **Acts 2:42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.** **The Apostles teaching:** the reciting of the Creeds, the reading of Scripture, and the Law and Gospel sermon. **Fellowship:** we gather corporately together to participate with one another. **Breaking of the Bread:** The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. And **the prayers:** since God has spoken to us, we respond back in prayer.

Scripture for the most part does not specifically command how we go about doing these things, as long it is conforms with biblical doctrine and is not spoken against. Making the sign of the cross is not mentioned, nor beginning with the Invocation, nor Corporate Confession and Absolution. We are called to Confess our sins and remember the Gospel words of forgiveness, to worship God as He has revealed Himself, and to remember who we are as baptized children of God. These are all very useful things. The problem comes when we think the things that we do make us right with God. When we begin to believe that our way makes us better in the eyes of God than those who do things differently. When we begin to believe that we are more pleasing to God than others because of this, that we have earned His favor where they have not, when we believe He loves us more than He loves them, when we begin to think that we are more "saved" than they are, we have become just as bad as these Pharisees.

And there are other ways we might fall into this trap. We might take pride in ourselves because we read the Bible every day and others around us don't, that we confess our sins every day and others don't, that we pray every day and others don't, that we go to Church every Sunday, and others don't. Any of these things are very healthy practices that I would encourage each and every Christian to take up. But they become a problem when we begin to see them as making us earn greater favor with our Lord, making us to be in right standing with Him more than others, that we earn His love more than others, that we are better Christians than others.

**Psalms 14:2-3** says <sup>2</sup> **The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.** <sup>3</sup> **They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.** These verses are not talking about only Old Testament people, or about unbelievers, but about us here today too. Isaiah takes it a step further in **Isaiah 64:6** **We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.** Even our healthy Christian practices come from a heart that is compromised by sin. We do them not simply for the glory of God or for the good of others, but to earn favor with God and with our fellow man, or to make ourselves look good in the eyes of our fellow man, or to build up our own ego. As far as pleasing God goes, that makes them no better than the Pharisees hand washing, because we do them in order to be right with God. And if that is what we are trusting in, we never will be.

## **The Ritual Washing That Does Make Us Right with God**

Jesus came to provide a much better and more powerful washing than the Pharisees held to. That washing is our Christian baptism. That's because its not a work that we do, but one that God Himself does in us and for us as He works through the means of water and His Word.

Jesus is God the Son come to earth to provide the power to cleanse that we receive in baptism. He did this by taking on our humanity. He is the one human being who never did things prompted by a sinful, selfish heart. What He said and did was always out of loving obedience to the Heavenly Father and in loving care for you and me. He stood in the waters of the Jordan River and was baptized by John to fulfill the will of the Father. And in doing so He declared the water of your baptism to be "a life saving flood" as our baptismal liturgy states. He had no sin to be washed off of Him. Instead, He allowed all our sin to be washed on to Him. In your baptism all your sin was washed on to Jesus, and He took it from you and took it to the cross. There He suffered and died for it in your place. There it was removed from you forever. Your life's record has been washed clean.

When God looks at you now, instead of seeing your sin, He sees Jesus perfect obedience, given to you in baptism in exchange for your sin. Because of this you are declared to be right with God, even when your thoughts, words, and actions don't live up to it. As the ongoing work of your baptism, your sins continue to be washed away every time the Holy Spirit shows you your sin and causes your heart to break over it. And then He shows you your Savior: crucified, dead and buried, and risen from the grave to live forever. His salvation work gives you the power and reason to confess your sin. And the faith He gives to you in your baptism, and is renewed in His Word and the Sacrament, gives to you the power by which you hold fast to the faith by which you are declared to be in right standing in the eyes of the Triune God.

## **Conclusion**

Most of the traditions and rituals that we have are good things. They are good and beneficial when we use them to point to and remind us of Jesus Christ and the work that He came to do for us here on earth. They are good when they encourage us to grow in faith toward God and in fervent love toward one another.

And what happens when our sinful selfish heart takes over and tries to turn them into the means to make us look good in the eyes of God and to look better in our own eyes than our fellow Christians? The forgiveness and right standing we receive from Christ and hold by repentant faith cleanses our heart and these works. They are pleasing to God not because how we do them, but because of perfect life Christ lived and gives to you.

So, keep on doing them, keep on washing your hands, attending worship and speaking the liturgy, singing the hymns and meditating on them. Do this whether it's Contemporary worship or Traditional Worship from one of the Divine Services. Do these things not to be right with God and earn His favor, but because Jesus has made you right with God. See them as the Spirit's means to keep you pointed to the One who saved us all by grace, through faith, and not by works. Keep your focus on the One who gives to you a life lived with Him now and eternal life to come. Amen.