

Tradition verses the Word

The gospel for this coming Sunday (Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost) is Mark 7:1-13. The Pharisees and teachers of the law have come as a delegation from Jerusalem, most likely to keep close tabs on Jesus and perhaps to see if they can find some way to discredit him. They latch onto the fact that the disciples are eating their bread “with hands that were defiled.” They were defiled because they hadn’t been ceremonially washed prior to the meal, in keeping with the traditions of the elders.

Over centuries of time, the Jewish rabbis collected, codified, and passed down a host of various rules, all intended to “build a fence around the Torah,” i.e., to keep people from coming anywhere close to violating a biblical injunction. On subjects where Scripture was silent, they spoke loudly. The massive collection of these rules was known as the “oral Torah.” Their philosophy seems to have been if one is good, two or more is even better. Hence there were thousands of rules.

Jesus’ point is that traditional rules added by the community are always outranked by divine statute. In verses 6-7 Jesus tells them their hearts are not in the right place where he is concerned and that their teachings were merely “*commandments of men.*”

The Jews had a vow called “*Corban.*” By using this word in a religious vow an irresponsible Jewish son could formally dedicate to God (i.e., to the temple) his earnings that otherwise would have gone for the support of his parents (fourth commandment). The money, however, did not necessarily have to go for religious purposes. Sometimes the Pharisees took it for their personal wealth.

Such hypocrisy still abounds, as most people worry more about human opinions than what God thinks. Given our own failures in this regard, it is a good thing that the Lord not only commands in His Word, but also graciously forgives and promises goodness. (TLSB)

Prayer: Dear Jesus, forgive me for hanging onto some traditions that get in the way of your divine teachings. Help me to look at the traditions I have in my life and see if they are helpful or harmful where your Word is concerned.