

The King Condemns Religion

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 00] Well, please take a seat. It'd be great if you could grab those inserts and follow along. That will be helpful for you.

Well, I thought I'd start this morning with a bit of a confession of sorts. I must confess that I'm a little bit of a clean freak. For example, when I was younger, I went on a Seb's camp and I actually packed a dustpan and broom with me.

I know it's pretty soft, right? I hated the sand in the tent. It gets worse, though. The kids that were in my tent, they had to leave their shoes off outside. Couldn't bring them in. I didn't want them tramping some dirt in.

And I'm afraid to say that my clean gene has been passed down to my son, Tim. One day, it was the middle of the day, and it was a hot day and he was a bit sweaty, so he wanted to have a bath. And we tried to explain, look, it's bath times at night time.

You can just wash your hands for lunch. And so he went off to the bathroom, and he didn't appear again for some time, and we went to look for him. This is how we found him. Photo? He climbed up into the vanity sink and poured himself a bath because he wanted to be clean.

[1 : 11] Thanks, Chris. Now, I'm happy to say that I'm a bit tougher these days. I'm not so soft. Though, I still insist before every meal that everyone washes their hands because I don't like eating with unclean hands.

And as we come to Mark's account of Jesus' life today, we're up to chapter 7 today, we meet some people who don't like eating with unclean hands either. However, it's for different reasons. And so there's an outline in your bulletin.

We're at point 1 and verse 6 on your insert. Sorry, verse 1 on your insert. Have a look at verse 1. Point 1, verse 1. Now, verse 1 talks about some Pharisees who had come up from Jerusalem.

These are like the theological heavyweights, you know, the big guns of Judaism, the city slickers, if you like. And we're not sure if they've come up from Jerusalem's in the bottom of Israel and Galilee's at the top and they've come up.

We're not sure if they've come up to deal with Jesus or for a different reason. But we do know the last time Mark mentions them, there was fireworks. There was great conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees.

[2 : 25] And so the fact that Mark signals them out here again, we can expect the same. In fact, last time Mark mentioned them, they called Jesus possessed by Satan himself. And this time it's going to be Jesus' turn to have some strong words for them, which we'll see in a moment.

But for now, notice what the so-called problem is. The so-called problem is that some of Jesus' disciples were eating with unclean hands. Now, their hands were unclean, not in the hygiene sense.

It had nothing to do with hygiene as it does for us. Rather, it was about their religious rules or traditions. Have a look on your inserts at verse number 3. Verse number 3 to 5. 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. And so the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders or the teachers of the law, instead of eating their food with unclean hands?

You see, at first glance, the problem is unclean hands. But really, underneath that, the problem is that the disciples, or some of them at least, were not following the traditions of the elders. Now, this ceremonial washing was just one of many traditions these Jewish leaders had invented and added on top of God's word.

[3 : 48] In fact, they've added hundreds and hundreds of rules, and they've collated them together in a book that the Jews call the Mishnah. And to give you an idea, in the Mishnah, there are over 40 pages devoted to just ceremonial washing, not counting the Sabbath day, not counting journeys, and so on and so on.

Just 40 pages of rules devoted to ceremonial washing alone. 42, in fact, I counted. And so in accordance with these traditions, at the entranceway of every Jewish house were tall, large stone water jars.

I've got a picture for them, actually. That's kind of what they look like, the big ones in the background there. And what would happen is, if a visitor or yourself came to the house, then you would cup your hands with water, let the water run through in between your fingers, because that way you didn't have to use much water and it still washed your hands.

And you'd also sprinkle water on jugs, etc. Things like that. And the idea was that you were washing away any moral or spiritual bad stuff that you may have picked up by being in the Gentile world, like the marketplace.

Remember, in those days, the world was divided into two people, two groups of people. In the Jewish mind, there was Jews and Gentiles. If you weren't a Jew, you were a Gentile.

[5 : 03] And the Jews were the people of God with that tradition and God's word and so on. The Gentiles had none of that. And so they were seen as outcasts. And so when you came home, you had to wash the Gentile world off you, so to speak.

And this ceremony of washing was a way of showing that you're part of God's holy people, that you're set apart to live for him and to live his way rather than the world's ways. And the principle behind it is not a bad thing, really.

I mean, we too are to live for God and his ways rather than following the world's ways. So the desire behind the tradition is a good thing, but the problem is the tradition became more important than people and even God.

Do you notice that we're told three times that this ceremony of washing was according to the tradition of the religious leaders or elders? As if to say that tradition had become the most important thing.

And this is the trap of tradition, which brings us to point to verse 6. Have a look there, verse 6. He replied, Jesus replied, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites.

[6 : 04] 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 instead holding to the traditions of men.

Now Jesus doesn't pull any punches here, does he? He calls them hypocrites. He slams their religion. Religion, of course, is just repeating certain traditions over and over again to try and please God, to get in his good books.

Now notice he doesn't just say, you guys are like the hypocrites that the prophet Isaiah spoke about. He actually says, Isaiah was talking about you. He prophesied about you. You are the hypocrites he was talking about.

And so they will face the judgment that Isaiah also mentioned from our first reading. For these Pharisees say with their lips that God is the most important, but in reality, their traditions are more important.

They claim to follow God and his commands, but in reality, they follow their man-made religious rules. And to prove it, Jesus gives an example of their hypocrisy. See verse 9?

[7 : 08] Verse number 9. And Jesus said to them, you have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions. For example, Moses said, honour your father and mother and anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.

That's in the Old Testament. But then 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. Now just let me unpack what Jesus is saying here because it's not quite clear at first glance.

Jesus is saying that in the Old Testament, God commands us to honour our parents, our father and mother. And he also says, any child who curses their parents must be put to death. Luckily that last one doesn't apply to us anymore.

Otherwise many kids would be dead, including mine. In fact, the only laws we are really under now are to love God and love our neighbour. We don't have time to unpack that now.

[8 : 09] You can talk to me more about that later if you like. But they were given for a specific time and for a specific purpose. Anyway, Jesus is saying there's laws in the Old Testament. And so the situation is that a son has declared whatever spare cash he has, whatever spare cash he gets, as a gift devoted to God.

He's declared it as Corban. That's what it means. And the religious tradition says that if you've declared it as Corban, as a gift devoted to God, then you can't change your mind. You can't then use some of it to help your parents.

And so if the parents get sick or something like that and they need help, the son has to say, look, mum and dad, I'm really sorry, but I've already declared it as a gift to God, as Corban. And the Pharisees and the religious rules say, I can't change my mind.

I can't use it anymore. I can't help you. And so says Jesus in verse 12, the Pharisees no longer let the son do anything for his parents because of their religious tradition.

In other words, their tradition stops them from obeying God's word, which says, honour your father and mother. And so verse 13, Jesus says, their traditions nullify or make nothing God's word.

[9 : 16] It's as though their traditions trump God's word. And so although they say with their lips that God is the most important, in reality, it's their religion, their religious traditions that are more important.

And that makes them hypocrites and under God's judgment. And I wonder if there's a bit of a warning in this for us. You see, we can go through the motions. We can say the right things with our lips, but our hearts are actually far from God and more occupied with what's more important to us.

And you see it at Christmas and Easter time. Often we get people coming to church on those special days to pay what is essentially lip service to God. But other things are more important than coming to church for the rest of the year.

You know, they honour God with their lips, but their hearts are really far from God. Otherwise, they'd be here every week. They could be. Instead, their tradition is sport or Sunday morning sleep-ins or whatever it is.

That becomes more important to them. And even for us who are regular attendees, we can still fall into this trap of religion. I've had conversations with people from other churches who think that unless we have communion every week done in a certain way with the minister wearing certain robes, then it's not real church.

[10 : 30] And so the tradition of communion becomes more important than hearing God speak through the Bible. On the other hand, I've had also met others who insist that there can't be any formality in church.

And ironically, they've made having no tradition into the tradition. You can't ever have any tradition, they say. But they've actually made it into a tradition. Now, don't mishear me.

It's still good to do things that people find helpful or things that people prefer. That's why we have different styles of services here at Trinity. And there's nothing wrong with traditions unless, that is, we make them more important than God himself.

And the way to tell if we've done that is to ask ourselves this question. It's to ask, is hearing God speak through his word so important to me that I could happily live without da-da-da whatever tradition it is?

You know, is hearing God speak to me through his word so important to me that I could happily live without a Sunday morning sleep in? That I could happily live without, you know, a certain type of music or a certain type of liturgy from the prayer book or whatever it is?

[11 : 33] And not too long ago we asked our 8am people whether, you know, we could get rid of the white robe. You know the angel suit that you see some people, angel suit, the surplus is the technical name.

And I was very encouraged by the response. We had comments back like this, it doesn't really worry us but we just prefer it. And I thought, that's terrific.

They haven't clung on to that tradition so much so that it's become more important than meeting together around God's word. It's just something they prefer. And I was very encouraged by that.

You see, if we sit here and sing the hymns and songs and say amen to the prayers or the creeds and song with our lips but our minds are thinking about, you know, how such and such a thing in the service is not being done as it ought to be or we're thinking about, you know, where we'd prefer to be or what we'd rather be doing then in the end we're falling into the trap of tradition that the Pharisees fell into.

We're just going through the motions honouring God with our lips but our hearts are far from him and in danger of judgment. And for these Pharisees the reason these traditions became so important is because in the end it's the way they tried to make themselves right with God.

[12 : 45] The idea behind the ceremonial washing is good to show people you're serious about living for God but it quickly became the way Jews tried to make themselves right before God. It's as though they said if I just follow these traditions and wash my hands and do these things and say these prayers or whatever it is then I'll make myself acceptable to God and be clean in his sight.

But the heart of the problem is not unclean hands the heart of the problem is the human heart which brings us to point 3 verse 14. Look there at verse 14.

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 is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean.

Jesus says listen understand in other words really pay attention to this. Now I don't know if you noticed but verse 16 is actually missing on your Bible readings did you notice that? Did anyone notice that? Verse 16 is missing it's also missing in the pure Bibles so it's not a typo I haven't actually left something out but the thing is there is a verse 16 that says if anyone has ears to hear let him hear but you realise in the olden days they didn't have photocopiers people were the photocopiers and so what's happened is a person copying out this passage thinks I really think we should insert this line because that's what Jesus said back in chapter 4 but most translations in fact all of them I think skip out verse 16 either way it doesn't matter because Jesus says the same thing in verse 14 he's saying listen really hear open your ears understand this what is it they don't understand well they're to understand that eating food with ceremonially unclean hands will not make us unclean before God I mean will God really hold it against us if we don't wash our hands is he that type of God it might make us sick if we never wash our hands but it won't make us unclean or unacceptable to God in fact the Old Testament even talks about purifying our hearts for it's our hearts that makes us unclean for what comes from our hearts that makes us unclean before God see verse 17 verse number 17 after he had left the crowd and entered the house his disciples asked him about this parable that he just told and he said 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 and he went on when what comes out of a man is what makes him unclean for from within him out of men's people's hearts come evil thoughts sexual immorality theft murder adultery greed malice deceit lewdness envy slander arrogance and folly all these evils come from within or from inside and make a person unclean now the disciples are so used to these traditions that they don't quite understand what Jesus is saying so he explains he says whatever we eat and however we eat it just doesn't matter it will go to our stomach and then out of our body literally he says it will go into our stomach and then into the toilet who cares it doesn't matter but the problem is not so the problem is not eating with unclean hands rather the real problem is unclean hearts for from within these hearts come evil thoughts envy we've all envied someone else greed slander evil thoughts and so on and these things make us unclean in other words it's our sinful hearts that is the real problem and no matter how much ceremonial washing we do on the outside it won't make us clean on the inside one of the things

[16 : 25] I spoke with Andrew and Emma about while we were talking about baptising grace this morning and in fact they already knew this which was great we spoke about the fact that the water in baptism isn't magical it doesn't make grace clean before God rather it's only an outward symbol and they already knew that which was great but I have had couples come to me to have their child baptised and they want to do that so that their child will be safe so as soon as the water goes over their head they know that's it he or she is acceptable before God clean before God just like the Pharisees thought their traditions would make them clean before God now don't mishear me baptism is a great symbol and it's a great joy to have baptised grace this morning but it doesn't make her or us or anyone clean in God's sight it's just a helpful outward symbol so what is the solution then to an unclean heart well the woman we meet next shows us which brings us to point 4 and verse 24

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre he entered a house and did not want anyone to know it yet he could not keep his presence secret in fact as soon as she heard about him a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit or unclean literally unclean spirit came and fell at his feet the woman was a Greek born in Syrian Phoenicia she begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter Jesus leaves the Jewish region of Galilee possibly to get some rest he hasn't had a rest for a while now he's been trying to get a rest since the feeding of the 5,000 or possibly he leaves because he's just called the Pharisees hypocrites and they've been plotting to kill him since chapter 3 so maybe he's just getting out of there either way Jesus enters a Gentile or an unclean region according to the Jews and I think by doing so he highlights what he's just said that it doesn't matter about uncleanness on the outside you know he can go to an unclean region or country that doesn't matter what matters is the heart in any case he meets there a Gentile woman who is outside of God's kingdom at the moment and this woman has a daughter with an unclean spirit now up to this point time and time again we've seen Jesus be compassionate and heal people even people who've come to him just for a quick fix and they don't really care who he is they don't really want to live for him or acknowledge him as God or anything like that they just come for a quick fix yet Jesus has compassion and he heals them nonetheless we've seen that time and time again and so when we get to verse 27 it's a little bit surprising what Jesus says to her for in verse 27 verse number 27 first says Jesus that the children eat all they want he told her for it's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs now in this little story or parable the children represent the Jews who are known as the children of God and the dogs represent the Gentiles like this woman who were not yet at God's table in the kingdom so to speak and so what Jesus is saying is that he has come first to save the Jews who believe in him and not yet to save the Gentiles but the harsh thing is that he's basically calling this woman a dog you notice that did you feel that now the word for dogs here refers to their household pet you know the kind of cute household pet rather than the wild animals but it still seems rather harsh doesn't it so why does Jesus do this well I don't think it's because he wants to get rid of her otherwise why engage in a conversation in the first place rather I think it's to actually highlight and provoke her response see look at how she responds in verse number 28 yes Lord she replied but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs you see this woman could have turned from Jesus in disgust and thought self-righteous you but I suspect

Jesus saw something in her something of a humble faith in this woman and so pushes her to show it and she does she humbly accepts that before God she is like an unclean dog she has nothing to offer God no heritage no she's not part of the chosen people she's got no ceremonial cleanliness nothing like that all she can do is beg for Jesus' generosity his grace and she continues to have faith in Jesus so much so that he might you know have something to offer even if it's just the crumbs from the table which she knows is more than she deserves and it's this humble faith in Jesus that brings salvation for her daughter see verse number 29 then he told her for such a reply you may go the demon has left your daughter she went home and found her child lying on the bed and the demon gone you see Jesus is the one who can cleanse people from what is unclean in this case the daughter from an unclean spirit because of the woman's humble faith in him and I think

Mark who's writing this account places this story of the woman here to contrast it with the earlier story about the Pharisees you see those Pharisees those religious leaders including the big guns from Jerusalem they think that being clean before God being acceptable before God is a matter of religion a matter of repeated traditions and in the end it leads them to consider these traditions as more important than God and his word but it's not about outward traditions or religious rules that make us clean or acceptable before God it's about having a humble faith in Jesus like this woman it's about acknowledging like this woman did that before God we are about as worthy as dogs now if that seems a bit too harsh for us then is it because we've got too lower view of God's perfection and too high a view of our own worthiness could it be that the Bible tells us that we were once enemies with God because of the way we lived because we turned our backs on him because of what came out of our hearts and so we must acknowledge our own unworthiness and like the woman cling to God's grace and we must believe or have faith in Jesus that at the cross

Jesus really did take our uncleanness upon himself so that we can be made clean in his sight now and forever that's what Andrew and Emma are going to be teaching grace as she grows up they're going to be teaching her that Jesus has died on the cross for her to make her clean and we need to have this same kind of humble faith and so the logical question as we begin to wrap up is are you clean before God then a bath or taking your shoes off at the tent or whatever it is won't make us clean before God nor will religious traditions make us acceptable before him only humbly trusting in Jesus can do that and so have you humbly put your faith humbly believe in Jesus for those of you who have then we must continue to have humble faith in Christ which always remembers that Christianity is not a religion which is about repeating certain traditions over and over again to earn

[23 : 44] God's favour rather Christianity is about believing in Christ and his death for us now I know many of you know this you know it's not about what we do the things we do it's about believing in Jesus but I need to say it because I recently heard a story about a congregation and not at this church and the minister asked them the question they said how are you made right with God how are you saved I've got three options for you and he said is it because of what Jesus has done is it because of what you do or is it a combination of both and the majority by far went option three it's a combination of both the Bible says we can't do anything to make ourselves perfect it's Jesus and Jesus alone and so we need to remember that Christianity is not a religion it's not about doing things to earn favour with God rather it's about trusting in Jesus and living in light of that but it's also about remembering God's great grace to us that while we were enemies dogs if you like he gave his son for us

I remember sitting around a group of Christians at uni and we were sharing prayer points and some of the people were asking for prayer points one for a sick relative I think another person for some uni exams that were coming up in fact I think we were all praying for uni exams that we could pass with as little study as possible but I remember I'm trying to remember his name I can't remember his name but I can vividly remember what he asked prayer for and he said look I just want to give thanks that God would forgive a sinner like me you see this guy had not long been a Christian he just discovered Jesus he knows the kind of life he lived before and he knew because of Jesus wash clean and he was so overwhelmed with thankfulness because of God's grace to him I thought yeah I've forgotten that I need to remember that too you see Christianity is not about religion it's about Jesus and about his grace to us let's pray that we might live like it let's pray our gracious heavenly father we do thank you for Jesus and we thank you that he came to do what we could not to die on a cross for our sins so that we can be made clean in your sight now and forever father we pray that you would help us never to elevate our traditions or our preferences or those things we like to do above you and your word rather help us always to live under your word and always thankful for your grace towards us in Jesus Christ and we pray it in his name amen well you guys thank you thank you