

Traditions

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[0 : 00] I'd like you in your Gospels according to St. Matthew, we have purchased 500 of these so far, and some of you are leaving them at home on Sunday morning, so I have to give you a word to remind you to bring them back with you, because there isn't enough to go around left here. So we're glad that you have them, and it would be nice if you'd bring them back when you come. Then you're at Matthew chapter 15 and verse 1, and it's found on page 41 in your Gospel according to St. Matthew.

I wanted to begin this morning by telling you that I wasn't going to preach a sermon, and then say April Fool, but I didn't want to suck you all in on that, because as it happens, we are having a distinguished series of parish communion preachers. In May, the bishop will be here for the confirmation on the first Sunday, and in June, Malcolm Muggeridge, who's doing his last roundup in Canada before he retires in England, is going to come and speak at St. John's on our parish communion, and in July, John Stott from All Souls Langham Place is going to be here. So we have a distinguished series of preachers, so I want to keep the preaching going here in preparation for their visit. The other thing that I'd like you to be aware of is that this business that we're looking at in Matthew chapter 15 has to do with tradition, and I want you to be thinking of the traditions by which you live your life. And as we read through the first 21 verses, then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came from Jerusalem to Jesus and asked him, why is it that your disciples disobey the teaching handed down by our ancestors, which in the Revised Standard Version is the traditions of the elders? They don't wash their hands in the proper way before they eat. Jesus answered, and why do you disobey God's command and follow your own teaching? For God said, respect your father and your mother, and whoever curses his father or his mother is to be put to death.

But you teach that if a person has something he could use to help his father or mother, but says, this belongs to God, he does not need to honor his father in this way. You regard God's command in order to follow your own teaching. You hypocrite! How right Isaiah was when he prophesied about you.

Well, I'm not going to read the rest of it because I'm afraid of losing your following, but it's there for you to read, and the section I want to deal with goes right to the end of verse 21 of chapter 15.

[3 : 08] Now, tradition is something that is part of all of us. I notice in coming to this parish that many of you come from families that have strong family traditions, and those that keep them prosper, and those that don't become the black sheep of the family. And it's true that there are as well military traditions, and military traditions are terribly important. When it was decided that all the members of the armed forces in Canada should wear one particular kind of uniform, a tradition was broken, and people felt very badly about it, because there's a lot of emotion packed into traditions, and it's important to keep them alive when they are good traditions. There are traditions that belong to private schools, and one of the things that happens, I suppose, when a lot of you I know go to private schools is that one of the things that you learn there is the traditions, and many of those are kind of proven traditions that tend to stand you in good stead. As long as the school tie you wear, it reveals the heart you have, and that they're compatible with one another.

But traditions in addition to in family, in the military, in school, there's also instant traditions. When the television wants to sell pressed toothpaste, they want to sell it by telling you that it's been a tradition in our family since way back in 1940. Well, that's a pretty good tradition. But then there are Campbell soup traditions that we are asked to become a part of, and there are Coca-Cola traditions and cooking oil traditions, and we're asked to pick up these traditions as a way of giving some stability and some root to our life. My mother did it, and her mother did it, and on and on it goes, and we all cook with the same kind of cooking oil. So those traditions are true. But then one of the other

things that media is able to do is to create instant traditions so that they can actually engineer the establishment of a tradition in our society by the focus of the media on a particular thing. I think punk rock must be a very instant kind of tradition, and it'll last for a short time, and then it will disappear to be replaced by some new instant tradition that's been established and that will sell t-shirts and shoes and clothes and hats and hair dyes and glasses and all sorts of wonderful things that are part of that instant tradition.

So that tradition becomes a very significant part of our life. It's often used to do some highly immoral things. Sometimes people get drunk at certain times in their life because it's a tradition to do so. Or they do other things which they cover up the immorality of it by saying, well, it's a tradition. Everybody does it at this age or at this time or under these circumstances. And so we use traditions for a lot of very different things, both good and bad. And of course, the church is hopeless because it has so many traditions. And the difficulty here is that it's suspected that God gave us these traditions and that if you break with them, you're breaking with God. And that ain't necessarily so. And that's why you have this confrontation in Matthew chapter 15. And it's a confrontation between Jesus and some Pharisees.

Now, if you look at the ministry of Jesus, you see something very interesting, that he was either crowded by people who were anxious to be healed or fed or forgiven or renewed or else. And that's what's happening in the end of chapter 14. He's surrounded by the sick. But the beginning of chapter 15, he's surrounded not by the sick any longer, but by those who were threatened by his ministry and who were threatened by the things that he was teaching and saying. And they were there to correct him. And the way they did it in chapter 15 was to notice that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands before they ate. And that was a tradition which had been established. And it wasn't simply because they knew what the germ count was on the hands that they came, but because the washing of hands had become symbolic. And it was a way of cleansing yourself from the defilement of people around you. If you'd been down to the shopping center, you were defiled with people. And the washing of your hands was a ceremonial cleansing from all those people so that you could be pure in heart. And they thought that by washing their hands, they were washing their hearts. So the Pharisees weren't concerned about germs. They were concerned primarily about the ritual uncleanness with which the disciples of Jesus took their food. And they criticized Jesus for that.

[8 : 38] And in one sense, it's a particularly ridiculous thing. But these are the criticisms, if you want, of the traditions that Jesus made. First he said, what you're doing by these traditions of yours is you're going against the commandment of God. One of the things you use traditions for is to sidestep this confrontation with the commandments of God. And you know what the commandments of God are about honoring your father and your mother and not stealing and not lying and not committing adultery and not bearing false witness and all these various things. But most of you are also aware that these, that most of these commandments of God are, we've built all sorts of traditional loopholes to go around them so that you don't have to confront the commandments of God. And so Jesus' first criticism of tradition was that it was a clever, acceptable, and sometimes cruel way of getting around the commandments. And the illustration that he used was that when you all have the responsibility, before our welfare society came along, of looking after the elderly, your older parents, before that happened, you were responsible to do it. But if you, in a burst of religious enthusiasm, said, I am going to commit all that I have to God, then you don't have to give any more to your parents, because everything you have belongs to God. And the way they reasoned, you see, was, I can use it, or I can give it to the temple. But no other use is legitimate because I've made this great vow. And this was a tradition that was established among the people, and by it they stepped around the commandment of God, as

Jesus points out, to honor your father and your mother. Even though that was a terribly significant and important commandment, they, by their tradition, God around it. The second thing it does for you is that it it saves you, or sorry, it can lead you into quite irrational behavior. And the irrational behavior is what Jesus argues in this whole passage. And he said, do you want to know what defiles you? It's not what happens to you in the marketplace. It's not from handling these things with your hands. That's not what defiles you.

What defiles you is the things that come out of your heart. In verse 17, don't you understand anything that goes into a person's mouth goes into his stomach and then on out of his body. But the thing that comes out of the mouth comes out of the mouth come from the heart, and these are the

things that make a person ritually unclean. For from his heart come the evil ideas which lead him to kill, to commit adultery, and do these other immoral things, to rob, lie, and slander others. So Jesus was trying to teach them that defilement isn't something that's outside of you that's going to get inside of you if you don't wash your hands. The defilement is going to come from inside of you. Can I tell you a rather grim story?

This is what comes from riding with undertakers. One of them told me that he had just sold a magnificent coffin. This is back in Ontario. They're very traditional about this back there, much more so than British Columbia. But that somebody had a magnificent coffin and the coffin was inside a magnificent gold casket. And he said that they bought it because they thought they could keep the defilement from the body by putting it inside all these things. But the undertaker said they don't know that the rot starts from inside. That's where the problem comes from in life, too. It's not the things around you that are to blame. It's not them that are going to hurt you. It's what's going on inside you. That's where the danger is going to come from. That's where the defilement is going to come from. So that the ceremonial washing of your hands is not going to keep you. And so Jesus said, what you have done is you have behaved in a totally irrational way. And many of the traditions, particularly in the church, lead you to do things which are totally irrational.

And because you do them, you overlook the reality of the fact of evil in our world, because you have thought that the problem comes from outside you and you've successfully avoided that and have never been prepared to deal with the problems that come inside you and which are the ones that are going to destroy you, unless you find some way of dealing with that kind of defilement.

[14:10] Those are the hard ones to deal with. As long as you can say the problem's over there or over there or over there or over there or over there, as long as you can say the problem is our culture, our society, our dog-eat-dog world, as long as you can say that it's somewhere outside, then you're relatively free.

But Jesus says, until you recognize that the problem is going to come from inside you, you don't know what life's all about. And so he says traditions are bad when they lead you into that kind of irrationality. And then he says finally that it can lead you to a personality breakdown.

And the personality breakdown that comes from this kind of tradition is spoken of when Jesus says, these people say, says God, honor me with their words, but their heart is really far away from me. And the personality breakdown comes when your words and your heart are two different things. What's going on in your heart and what you're saying with your mouth are contradictory to one another.

And that leads to a personality breakdown. And he said, a lot of you that you know all the traditions so that you can spout them with your lips, but they don't reveal the true nature of your heart. So these are the things that traditions can do that are wrong. They can help you to sidestep the commandment of God. They can help you to do something which is totally irrational and everybody knows is foolish. But you go on doing it. And it can create personality breakdown because of your lips saying one thing and your heart being somewhere else. Think of this, if you will, in terms of the confirmation class. And I'm deeply concerned about them and praying for them and anxious that they should really come to grips with this. A lot of them think that the purpose of confirmation class is to learn how to ritually wash their hands so that they won't get into trouble all around them. But it's different than that, isn't it? It's really not to learn to teach them certain traditions that belong to the church.

[16:39] It's to teach them of some of the reality that they encounter with the Word of God. So Jesus implies that this is how we are to use traditions in a good and beneficial way.

If traditions create a personal confrontation with God through prayer, worship, and reading. In other words, traditions are to be born not secondhand passed on from one generation to another, but they're to be born out of an individual personal relationship to God. And the reality and preservation of traditions comes out of that relationship. And this is what the difference between the Pharisees and Jesus and his disciples. The Pharisees were teaching the traditions of the elders. Jesus was trying to bring his disciples into personal confrontation with God on a daily basis. The second thing about traditions that you can make them useful is that they can bring heart and lip together. That is, if you can get to the place where what you are believing in your heart you are confessing with your mouth, then that's wholeness.

And that's what you need to learn to do. Not to use traditions to separate heart and mouth, but to use traditions to bring those two things together so that we establish in the community and

fellowship of the church the context in which what we say with our lips we believe in our hearts. That's the danger of belonging to the choir.

But you learn to do a lot of things with your lips. And of course, you have to bring them together with your hearts, too, as do we all. The third thing about it is traditions Jesus teaches are not to be secondhand. They're not to be things that are passed down to you from somebody else.

Because if they are, then you are once removed from the source of those traditions. And what Christ is teaching is that you are to be in direct and personal contact with the source of good tradition.

[19 : 10] And that tradition is God and his word to us. So that we don't do things which are incompatible with that, but we do things because of our own desire for personal obedience to God and a personal relationship to him in our failure and in our sinfulness and in our rebellion that we know who it is that we're offending.

We're not just breaking with tradition, which sometimes is a good thing to do. But right traditions which come from God mean that when they're broken, you're breaking the relationship with God. Therefore, make sure all your traditions are firsthand. And finally, tradition is the means by which you open up your heart to the truth.

You see, if somebody says, what does it mean to be a Christian? And you say, go to church. All you're telling them is that this is a tradition, that Christians go to church. But you see, it's not the tradition that we have to pass on. It's that in going to church, you are confronting the living God. And that's what you need to do, is to confront the living God. And this service of Holy Communion that we're all involved in is steeped in tradition.

[20 : 38] There are traditional ways of doing everything. It's interesting coming to Vancouver, having driven in Toronto for a number of years, where there are stop signs on every corner.

In Vancouver, they don't give you stop signs on every corner. And until you learn the tradition, whatever it is, you're liable to get all your fenders bent.

Because you think the other guy's going to stop. Well, that's how sometimes traditions work. You just run into things you didn't expect to run into. And traditions help us not to do that.

But the fundamental fact of all the traditions of our church are to facilitate you coming to the place, you and me coming to the place, where we are confronted with the God to whom all hearts are open, from whom no secrets are hidden.

Coming into that place, standing in a one-to-one relationship before our Lord Jesus Christ. That's the function of our tradition.

[21 : 49] To bring us into that place. And recognizing that they can be used for exactly the opposite. So we've got to constantly renew our traditions.

So that we find ourselves confronting the God who has chosen to confront us in the person of Jesus Christ. I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

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