

The Opposition Tradition

Mark 7:1-23

Introduction

When we were living in Indonesia we were sometimes asked to speak on topics that weren't really in our field of expertise. Indonesia has a growing and frightening problem with AIDS and I was asked by the Muslim University Students Association of our area to speak on how Australia had combatted the spread of AIDS. After doing some homework I presented the information and I asked the students some questions. One of the questions I asked was, "Are people more likely to be better people and do the right thing when rules are imposed from the outside or when there is a change on the inside?" If this question was turned around I would have essentially been asking the question Jesus implies in this story that's been read to us, "Are people made unclean by things outside of them or by what's inside them?"

This morning we're going to see how Jesus took issue with people who would use traditions and rules to burden people and keep them in their place and more broadly how Jesus took exception to people creating rules under the guise of being religious but were actually dishonouring God and breaking his commands. Finally we'll see how Jesus identifies the heart of the problem which is the problem of the heart.

Using Tradition To Put People In Their Place (vv. 1-8)

So then, here we have some Pharisees and teachers of the law come down from Jerusalem (so these are the big-wigs again). They saw that Jesus' disciples didn't wash their hands according to the traditions of the elders and so they speak to Jesus about this.

We should note that it's fairly clear that the Pharisees and teachers of the law are using this situation to cast aspersions on Jesus' authority as a teacher. If Jesus' disciples are shown to be acting in improper ways then it is clear that Jesus mustn't

be teaching them correctly and so Jesus can be shown to be a Rabbi unworthy of being followed.

It's interesting to see how strongly Jesus responds on this occasion. Let's look at verses 6 to 8.

[Jesus] replied, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.'

Jesus highlights the disingenuous nature of the Pharisees and their question. The specific accusation here is that the Pharisees and teachers of the law are displaying a commitment to God but only on the surface because their hearts are not in it. More deeply, should their teachings be examined in greater detail, it will be seen that rather than truly honouring God, they are honouring human traditions instead.

Jesus will indeed go on to show how the Pharisees and teachers of the law held to and taught rules that actually contradicted God's commands. We will look at what Jesus says in verses 9 to 13 in a moment but it's worth noting that it is characteristic of Jesus to speak firmly when people seek to use rules to put other people in their place and by extension, allow those making the accusation to feel better because they're better at obeying rules.

Now the difficulty in providing an illustration for such behaviour today is that I'm at risk of some people thinking that I'm targeting them. However, it's normally helpful for us to have illustrations so we can better understand how what Jesus is describing might relate to us. So I will give a couple of illustrations but let me say that as I thought of these illustrations I genuinely wasn't thinking of anyone at Laidley or Hatton Vale Uniting Churches.

I think one way that people can use religious rules that come from human tradition to put other people in their place is through what we wear to church on Sunday. Some people will put on their 'Sunday best' because they want to show that God is important in their lives and they want to dress smartly as if they were meeting

royalty. Such motivation for 'Sunday best' is great. However, others wear 'Sunday best,' which is your best clothes but nothing too fancy because you wouldn't want to appear to be drawing too much attention to yourself, as a way of indicating that they know they have a right to be in church and they would look down upon someone who just came in off the street. Such thinking about Sunday best is obviously unhelpful.

Ironically, it looks like we now have swung wildly the other way where anyone who does dress smartly for church is looked down upon because, "don't they know that Jesus is like my bro and we just hang out here in church like I do with my mates in the car-park? There's no difference, right?!" Any use of a clothes etiquette to put other people 'in their place' is something which Jesus would likely have taken exception to and is opposed to the spirit of God's law.

My second example, and this may seem very strange for many of you, is the issue of which version of the Bible should be used. I know that some versions of the Bible are better than others but any version put out with the authority of the Bible Society is able to be trusted. In some churches the English Standard Version (ESV) is regarded as the Bible that serious Christians really should be using but you may have noticed that I almost always use the New International Version (NIV) here in church and that's because it's a good translation, it reads smoothly and it's very widely used. I think God cares about what version of the Bible we use because he cares about us knowing him but God is strongly opposed to people using a Bible version to make themselves feel better as if they're more serious or mature than other brothers or sisters in-Christ.

Perhaps you identify with issues of Sunday clothing or with versions of the Bible but maybe they're not concerns to you at all and you'd never think that you're better than someone else ... except that you know the rules about the way morning tea is supposed to be done. Of course I don't know, but it doesn't hurt for us to reflect occasionally on whether we have elevated traditions to a place of rules and we like to use our knowledge and obedience of those rules to put others in their place. May the

Lord expose such thinking in us and help us to confess such pride and be renewed by the Holy Spirit.

Using Tradition To Put God In His Place (vv. 9-13)

While bad, it's one thing to use rules to put people in their place, but it's far worse to use rules to try and put God in his place. We now turn to verses 9 to 13 where Jesus identifies how the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were using their own rules and traditions to negate the commands of God.

And [Jesus] continued, 'You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, "Honour your father and mother," and, "Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death." But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God) – then you no longer let them do anything for their 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.'

While we get the gist of what's being described here we do find it difficult to understand the specifics. I'll try to use some modern terminology to help us understand what's going on.

There are two views as to the problem that Jesus has in mind when he describes a scenario where a person says that what should be used to help his or her parents is now 'Corban' (an offering to God).

The first view is that there are some people who are simply caught out by a promise that they have made. Here's an example: A Jewish lady is blessed with a nice home and this home also has a granny flat out the back. The lady says, "I'm so thankful to Yahweh for the blessing of this home I want to use it for his glory and so I won't rent out the granny flat, I promise to use it for Yahweh and so I'll let missionaries stay in it for free ... I've heard that Jonah might be in need of a place to stay after he returns from Nineveh."

All good so far but this lady was speaking like this when her parents were healthy and a few years later her parents aren't healthy any more. The lady

approaches the local synagogue which has been arranging for the missionaries to stay in the granny flat to tell them they she needs to take care of her parents and so they're going to stay in the granny flat. The lady is told that she made a promise for her granny flat to be an offering to God and there's no going back on her word, not even to provide care for her parents.

If this is the scenario which Jesus had in mind then he is saying that it is wrong to elevate the importance of keeping a promise made in a particular circumstance above an explicit command of Yahweh. While this example is bad, the next is worse.

The second scenario is not of a mis-spoke vow but rather of a deliberate manipulation of the situation so that a son or daughter could avoid his or her responsibility to the parents. An example of this situation would be a son who has a car but this isn't just any car, this is a Ford and not just any Ford, this is a Ford Falcon. Specifically this is a 1971 XY model Ford Falcon GT with the Handling Option. For those in the know, I've just described the Phase 3 GTHO Ford Falcon, one of the rarest and most valuable Australian made cars you could own. You could buy a house with what a Phase 3 GTHO is worth. In this scenario the son has his pride and joy Phase 3 GTHO and he receives news that his parents are in great need. What will the son do? He could sell the car and meet their needs but he doesn't want to do that. Instead, the man makes a trip down to his local synagogue and speaks to the man in charge who is a friend and says, "I would like my Phase 3 GTHO to be an offering to Yahweh. You can have it after I'm dead." The person in charge agrees and so the son is now free to use the car whenever he wants while he's still alive and can tell his parents', "I'm sorry, I'd love to help you out but my car is Corban and so I can't sell it ... and I probably shouldn't let you drive it ... for that matter I don't think you're even allowed to sit in it."

We can see why Jesus would have taken particular exception to this scenario of deliberately manipulation to nullify the responsibilities which people had to family.

It appears that there's evidence for both scenarios and so maybe Jesus had both in mind. Jesus is taking issue with the use of human traditions and rules which

had been developed over time and had originally been intended to protect and clarify God's commands but had ended up simply entrapping people and blocking people from engaging with the heart of God's commands.

What's Inside Is What Counts (vv. 14-23)

So then, if our Sunday clothing or the version of the Bible we use isn't going to be what's going to be what characterises us as clean or sets us apart for God, what does make the difference? This is what Jesus addresses in verses 14 to 23.

Jesus makes a comment pregnant with meaning, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them." Later he clarifies to the disciples what he means. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body."

The idea that outside things can defile us is not a strong idea any more for Christians but we do still see it in some areas and in some churches. In some churches the consumption of any alcohol would be viewed as impure for Christians. More broadly I know a number of Christians who view smoking this way. I trust that you all know that I don't smoke and in all honesty I do think smoking is a dumb thing to do but I really can't see that it makes someone impure or defiled before God. Within other Christian circles people can be regarded as being defiled by wearing make-up, the school kids attend, and so on. Jesus is saying here that all these things are external to us and they don't defile us.

What is it then which causes a person to be unclean? We're told in verses 20 to 23, "[Jesus] went on: 'What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.'"

Jesus' list is not intended to be exhaustive, there are twelve evil thoughts or actions (twelve sins) which are listed here and twelve was used to indicate a set. The

sins which Jesus identifies here includes acts which are committed with or against other people and thoughts which are inside a persons head.

I've run out of time to go through in detail the sins which Jesus identifies and that's not to say that specific sins are not important but here the emphasis is not on specific sins so much as the focus is on the issue of where defilement and alienation from God comes from. Jesus is here showing that defilement comes from within.

Conclusion

In conclusion then, rather than looking for things on the outside which defile good people Jesus is saying that people are already defiled from what's on the inside. It has been said that the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart and the human heart is set on rebellion against God and this is where the real change needs to take place.

Next week we'll see an example of someone who has a right heart despite external appearances.

We're going to conclude our service with two songs, one a classic hymn and the other is one of the newest songs we've learnt and they both have the same intent. Use these songs as prayers that the Lord would have all your lives (not just what's on the surface so that you look great before others) and that the Lord would fill our hearts with his love and this in turn would overflow to others.

[Confession to close]