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THE TROUBLE WITH TRADITION

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My parents were and are deeply religious people, strong Christians, but they never put up any pictures of Jesus anywhere in our house. They had framed texts of Scripture, but never any pictures. I think part of the reason is that these pictures we see of Jesus are misleading in that they show Jesus as some lily-white, anemic, wimpy guy with a far-away, wistful expression. The pictures of Jesus on the cross show him with a little trickle of blood coming down a gaunt face atop an underfed body.

When we lay aside those pictures of Jesus that we've grown up with and we look at the Scriptural account, we realize Jesus is nothing like the picture at all. I assure you, none of those are accurate in the least, for Jesus was strong enough to carry a beam of wood on a back that had been ripped to shreds! But even before that, we see from the way He handles problems that He is made of the strongest stuff. He's "got guts."

We're going to see today how Jesus met people with wrong attitudes head on. He didn't beat around the bush. He wasn't nasty or condescending; He spoke the truth in love. He *had* to speak out because there were (and are) some in society who put their own *pride* before the needs of other people. Let's look at Mark 2:13–17:

¹³ *And he went forth again by the sea side; and all the multitude resorted unto him, and he taught them.*

¹⁴ *And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the receipt of custom, and said unto him, Follow me. And he arose and followed him.*

¹⁵ *And it came to pass, that, as Jesus sat at meat in his house, many publicans and sinners sat also together with Jesus and his disciples: for there were many, and they followed him.*

¹⁶ *And when the scribes and Pharisees saw him eat with publicans and sinners, they said unto his disciples, How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners?*

¹⁷ *When Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*

I'm sure you all know that the tax collectors were pretty much hated by everyone except other tax collectors. We may or may not like paying our taxes in our day, and we may or may not have had some bad experiences with our own IRS, but I assure you that we do not view our tax men with the same loathing that the people of Jesus' day loathed them. First, they were viewed as being traitors to their own people—Jews working with the Romans for the suppression of their fellow Jews! At least in America our money is for our own government. Well, not all of it, but at least our own government decides where to squander it! Second, the tax collectors had no salary from the Roman government. Instead, they made their living by adding their own fees to the assessment of their fellow Jews. Yes, they were universally loathed.

Did I say *universally*? There was One who loved them, and you know who He is. Despite their shortcomings, despite their lack of moral rectitude, Jesus loved them. Here he called one of them to be

His permanent follower! Jesus knew of the longing in this man's heart. His name was Levi. I don't think it's too far to imagine Levi as a man who came to hear Jesus preach whenever he could, who longed to follow Jesus, but felt totally unworthy, trapped by his poor choices in life. Yes, Levi was unworthy to follow Christ; but what Levi did not realize is that no one is worthy to follow Christ! While no one is worthy, Christ loves us and calls to us anyway—what a blessed thought!

So Jesus called Levi. The very next day, we find Jesus at a feast, eating with these tax collectors and any other sinners who were so low in the eyes of their countrymen that they would willingly find friendship among the loathed tax collectors. It is very likely that Levi threw this feast as a sort of goodbye party, showing his friends and acquaintances that he was leaving the old for something new. And it was not at all uncommon for a man to change his very name when something significant happened in his life. We find, for example, *Saul* changed to *Paul*. Nor is it uncommon for Jesus to change someone's name, as He did for *Simon* who became *Peter*. At some point, and very likely at this party, Levi's name was changed to *Matthew*, who wrote for us a beautiful gospel which focuses on Christ as the promised King of the Jews.

Levi (or Matthew) is having his going away party, and people are celebrating for him—but not everyone is pleased! Oh, no! The scribes and Pharisees obviously knew Jesus was a rabbi, a religious leader, and according to their *traditions* a religious leader would never be seen in such company. “How dare He violate our traditions? How dare He do such a thing? Why, He's dragging down the whole system by acting like that!” But Jesus wasn't interested in sparing their pride or their traditions. He came to help people; and when helping people violated tradition, He always helped people. Now that is not to say He just indiscriminately threw off tradition! No, you will find Jesus was a very traditional Jew; yet He never let tradition stop Him from helping people, even if it meant causing a scandal among the rigid traditionalists.

Jesus' reply is so beautiful to my ears: *They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.* One person paraphrased it in these words: “To those who think they're righteous, I have absolutely nothing to say. But to these who know they're sick, and are open for help, I am fully available as a minister to their souls.”¹

Jesus would have no part of the pride and the prejudice of the established religious authorities. I would hope that Waverly Hall Baptist Church is completely past the age of prejudice. Here's an easy way to test your own heart, though: how would you feel if a Black family came to church? I'm sure you're all fine with that; but what about *ten* Black families? Ask yourself! Or what if your pastor suddenly became handicapped and had to alter the way he ministers? Would you be accepting of that? Or what if your pastor became disfigured in a fire and looked and spoke like a serious burn victim? Would you be accepting of that, or would you say, “Well, he just can't be an effective pastor because that's not what we expect from our pastor”? Does your heart buck at any of those ideas?

Let's move on to the next section. One of the major problems Jesus had to deal with was tradition; well, not tradition itself, but some people's attitudes toward it. Every tradition had become sacred, and there were thousands and thousands of them. Every part of life and culture had become rigidly locked into careful subscription to various traditions; and even the slightest deviation from tradition brought sharp and immediate criticism.

¹ Ray Stedman, “The Scandal Maker.” 20 October 1974. Available at <http://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/mark/the-scandal-maker>.

Now, friends, I'll be the first to admit that there are many traditions which I love; and I know that I am speaking to a very traditional congregation. There's nothing wrong with tradition! The problem starts when we exalt tradition over everything else—when we get angry and upset, when we get harsh and judgmental, when we become bitter and argumentative over someone's failure to observe our tradition. What happens is we put our *pride* before the needs of other people.

Let's see how Jesus handled this in verse 18–22:

¹⁸ *And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto him, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?*

¹⁹ *And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.*

²⁰ *But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.*

²¹ *No man also seweth a piece of new cloth on an old garment: else the new piece that filled it up taketh away from the old, and the rent is made worse.*

²² *And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles.*

The context is apparently a day on the Jewish calendar designated as a day of fasting. Now, the only day set aside for fasting each year according to Scripture is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement; but in Jesus' day, the religious authorities had designated many days of the calendar year as fasting days. And of course they made a big deal of showing how devout they were on such days: they wore coarse clothing called sackcloth and they rubbed ashes on their faces. They spent the day looking miserable in public so that everyone else could see how devoted they were. There was no real emotional attachment to being sorry for sin; it was all for show. But they took these days seriously and they expected everyone else to as well.

Well, along comes a fasting day and neither Jesus nor His disciples are fasting! Remember, it's tradition, not Scripture, at stake here. Jesus basically tells them, "Look, why should those who worship God be sad or pretend to be sad when they have reason to rejoice?" Jesus didn't expect His followers to be sorrowful or serious or sober while He was among them.

My friends, I truly believe that when we partake of the Lord's Supper, remembering His suffering for us, that is a sober time; but when we worship the Lord, when we enter His presence, let us be joyful! Let us sing and worship the Lord with joy!

Notice, though, what Jesus says about the patch on the clothing and the wine skins. Natural cloth shrinks, and when a new patch is put on old clothes, the new patch will shrink and then pull at the original garment. Old wine skins become rigid and inflexible; and when new wine is put into an old wine skin, it will expand and break the skin. So the idea is that it doesn't make sense to be rigid about tradition. There's nothing wrong with tradition, but we can't let our love of tradition destroy or overrule the needs of people in the present. Love people first!

The scribes and Pharisees loved making up additional regulations and holding people to them. They simply took what the Bible said and made up a number of traditions that were designed to keep people from breaking the Law. But their extra traditions imposed impossible burdens on people, and Jesus

would have none of that! Look at the remaining verses in this chapter if you would:

²³ *And it came to pass, that he went through the corn fields on the sabbath day; and his disciples began, as they went, to pluck the ears of corn.*

²⁴ *And the Pharisees said unto him, Behold, why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful?*

²⁵ *And he said unto them, Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was an hungred, he, and they that were with him?*

²⁶ *How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the shewbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to them which were with him?*

²⁷ *And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath:*

²⁸ *Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.*

Now, on any other day of the week, what Jesus' disciples were doing would have caused no controversy. The Law allowed those who were passing through a field to grab a little wheat to eat on the spot. You couldn't take stalks of wheat or put a bunch in a basket, but you could get enough to eat while you were there. The problem is that the disciples were doing this on the Sabbath Day! The religious authorities thought they really had Jesus this time. He had violated the Sabbath, which is clearly out of line! They put it to Him in those terms, too: "Why are You letting Your disciples break the Law? What kind of teacher are You?"

But you know what? The Bible never says you can't get a bite to eat on the Sabbath Day. It says you can't use it as a day of work as any other day, but it never says you can't make a meal. Tradition said that you couldn't make a meal. You see, traditional rules had been put into place which specified what exactly constituted work—and that basically included any normal activity. God had said that we can't use the Sabbath for a normal work day, but the religious authorities had made it so that *everything* was off limits on the Sabbath.

Jesus' reply is classic. He says, "Didn't you ever read in 1 Samuel 21 about the time that David and his men, with nothing to eat, went into the tabernacle and ate the special bread in there? Did God ever chastise David for that?" The point is that people's needs come before tradition. If the rules interfere with meeting people's basic needs, then we need to revisit the rules, not force people to suffer.

Now, I'm not advocating throwing off traditions for the sake of throwing off traditions, and neither was Jesus; but we should be aware of the condition of our own hearts if we simply want to enforce rules for the sake of enforcing rules. There has to be a balance. Jesus was not advocating civil disobedience or breaking the Law, but rather He was interested first and foremost with helping people. Jesus kept the Law, but broke traditions when necessary. And aren't you glad about that? What if Jesus had loved the Law and loved traditions more than He loved people? We would without exception be without hope today. But Jesus never put pride before the needs of people. We're the ones who do that!

Friend, if you are here today needing a Savior who loves you in spite of yourself, if you are in need of a Physician for your wounded soul, won't you come to Him today? And if you're here this morning, deeply offended by the words you've heard, won't you come, too? Let's ask God to make us more concerned with *people* than with our pride, our traditions, our prejudice, our *anything*.