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## A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE SPIRIT

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### Mark 7

We're finally back in the book of Mark this week, after many weeks of things like Homecoming, Christmas, and an extended review of our church covenant for the new year. If you've forgotten what we last talked about in Mark, don't worry: I did, too! It's a shame what age will do to a man, isn't it?

We're going to pick up in Mark 7 today, in which we are confronted with the influence of tradition. Now, I'm a traditional person. I love our traditional hymns, and I love reading and preaching from the King James Version of the Bible. There's nothing wrong with tradition, even in the passage that we're reading. The trouble comes with our attitude about tradition. I want you to think about this question as we read Mark 7 today: when does tradition become a problem? With that in mind, let's read Mark 7, starting in verses 1 through 4:

<sup>1</sup> *Then came together unto him the Pharisees, and certain of the scribes, which came from Jerusalem.*

<sup>2</sup> *And when they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashen, hands, they found fault.*

<sup>3</sup> *For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders.*

<sup>4</sup> *And when they come from the market, except they wash, they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the washing of cups, and pots, brasen vessels, and of tables.*

It seems to me that these guys came looking to pick a fight. In the verses just before this passage, we find Jesus healing people by the score. I mean, there's the wonderful work of God going on. People are believing, people are excited, Jesus is doing what He does best—and here come the sour-faced Pharisees, finding fault and criticizing.

Has that ever happened to you? You know you're putting out your best effort, you see good things happening, and then here comes the cold water! Someone comes along and tears into you for some reason or other. That hurts, doesn't it? I can tell you that it's very discouraging. It just knocks the wind right out of you when no matter how much good you are doing, someone comes along and lands on you with both feet over something that really doesn't even matter in the first place. That's what is happening here.

You see, the Pharisees were not concerned with whether or not a person's hands were clean; to them, what mattered is that the hands had been washed in a certain ritualistic fashion. First water had to be poured on open hands, palms up; then the person washing would make two fists, using one to scrub the other and vice versa. That was the accepted way. Now, you will find a great deal in the Old Testament about washing hands, but you will never find this prescribed method. It was something born of tradition.

I have no doubt that the disciples and others with Jesus had washed their hands. I don't think their hands were covered in grime. What you have to understand about the Pharisees is that to them, it did not matter if you washed your hands with soap seven times or scrubbed like a surgeon—all that mattered was that a person washed palms first, then scrubbed the fists together.

Is it apparent to you that a person could be ceremonially clean according to the Pharisees' tradition and still be hygienically unclean? Is it also apparent that a person could be perfectly clean hygienically and yet be unclean according to the Pharisees' tradition? That is what I believe is happening here. I don't think the people with Jesus had dirty hands. They were Jews, too, and they resisted being dirty. I think they just didn't wash their hands *the way the Pharisees thought they should*.

The Pharisees had devoted an immense amount of time setting forth in excruciating detail the exact way things should be washed, even cups and pots. Again, there's nothing in Scripture about these practices, which is why Mark makes it clear that they "received to hold" them in verse 4. In other words, they said to themselves "This is the way we've always done it; that makes it the right way. It's *unspiritual* to do it any other way." If you stick around in any church long enough, you'll hear some variation of those words.

This brings me back to the question I posed earlier: when does tradition become a problem? Let me say again that I am very traditional, and I love our traditions. What if I am like the Pharisees in that respect, though? How would I know? I would submit that traditions are only a problem if we use them to substitute for true spiritual worship.

Think about that: I think that we often think that if we keep the external motions in place, we are okay spiritually. We don't need to worry about *what's really going on inside* of ourselves spiritually as long as we keep doing *the right things on the outside*.

If that be true, then anything can become a substitute for true worship. Wouldn't you agree with that statement? Anything can become a substitute for true worship. You know what? We can go to church every Sunday because it's traditional to go to church—and never be really affected inwardly at all. We can give our tithes and offerings from a sense of tradition and never really consider that giving is part of our worship. We can sing all the right songs, pray all the right prayers, teach all the right doctrines, and still be going through external motions.

I'll give you an example of a tradition that we have here in our church. I'll tell you up front that I happen to really like this tradition. When we have the Lord's Supper, we have a way of distributing the cup and the bread. First, two deacons pass those elements to the congregation; then the deacons sit, and the pastor distributes the elements to all of the ordained deacons, whether they are currently serving as deacons or not; finally, the chairman of the deacons gives the elements to the pastor. Now, as I've said, I happen to like that tradition. I think it is a fine way to carry on the Lord's Supper, but I cannot find anywhere in Scripture that tells me that it *must* be done in exactly that fashion. Now, what happens if, in the future, we have another pastor who has been trained to pass the elements out a different way? Maybe that pastor is used to distributing the elements himself, and he wants to continue to do so. Or maybe he wants to allow the children in the church to distribute the elements for a particular occasion. Is he wrong? No, I don't believe he is wrong; but I wonder if he'd get an earful from someone? What is more important: doing things the way we've always done them, or enjoying our time of communion with the Lord and with each other?

I think the key is in what Jesus said to that precious woman at the well in John 4:24. The woman tried

to sidetrack Jesus with a question about tradition: where is the most correct place to worship God? Jesus said the place didn't matter. He said, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." That, my friends, is the key.

You know, for a time we met as a church in people's houses. During that time, we missed much of what we associate with our worship experience. We had no piano, and that was a great loss to us. We had none of the trappings of church. Our hymns were all photocopies because we had no hymnals. We had a bulletin and a prayer sheet, thanks to Barbara, but that was about it. No stained glass. No padded pews. You know what? We found out that as much as we enjoy those things, they are only things. True worship is carried out in the Spirit, no matter if you're in a house, or a church building, or a jail, or anywhere else.

I'm going to wrap this up for today with this thought: it is perfectly fine to have and enjoy traditions as long as those traditions do not become substitutes for spirituality. Do not judge yourself or others by the adherence to external traditions. We need to look inward and ask ourselves why we do what we do. My friends, is there joy in serving Jesus for you today? Or are you more concerned that everything be done at church according to a strict code? I say, let's enjoy our traditions, but at the same time realize that those traditions are for *us*; they are for *our* enjoyment, but they do not buy favor with God. God wants us to worship Him in spirit and in truth.