

13 S after Pentecost 8/22/21
 Mark 7:1-13 16B

“YOU LEAVE THE COMMANDMENT OF GOD AND HOLD TO THE TRADITION OF MEN.”

So, can we eat meat on Friday or not? Should we pray to Mary as the co-redeemer? Should we listen and do whatever the “President, Prophet, Seer, and Revelator” in Salt Lake City tells us to do? Should we strap explosives onto our bodies and blow up the infidels, making a martyr of ourselves so that we can enter in paradise? Or, should we listen to Jesus who says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me (Jn 14).”

What is the 2nd Commandment? That’s the one about not misusing the name of the Lord your God. We typically think of the 2nd Commandment pertaining to profanity, four-letter words. To be sure, Paul writes, “Let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouths,” but the 2nd Commandment really does not pertain to four-letter words (Ep 4:29). Its more about telling lies about God. Luther writes in the *Large Catechism* that “the greatest abuse occurs in spiritual matters. These have to do with the conscience, when false preachers rise up and offer their lying vanities as God’s Word” (LC I 54).¹ The greatest abuse against the 2nd Commandment is when false preachers tell their lies about God.

This is what Jesus is warning us of in our Gospel lesson this morning. The Evangelist Mark tells us that the Pharisees and some scribes came to Jesus. But they were not coming for mercy. They came to Jesus to accuse and condemn Him because some of His disciples did not follow the custom of washing their hands before they ate. Such washing was not done for sanitary reasons, to prevent the spread of Covid, or the flu, or germs. Rather, the Jews feared that their hands may have become ritually

unclean by accidentally brushing against a Gentile, the possession of a Gentile, or anything else that was ritually unclean. The KEY here is this: This ritualistic washing of hands, as well as cups and pots, was **not** required by God in His law. They were holding to the “tradition of the elders” rather than the Word of God.

What was so harmful about the Pharisees’ and scribes’ criticism of Jesus’ disciples is the false belief that motivated it. These religious leaders believed that they were right with God because they completely and perfectly fulfilled the letter of the law, the law they themselves had written. To put it as simply as I can: they believed they were saved by their works.

“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men,”

Jesus said of them.

This tradition of men still fills our world and our ears today. The devil and our own flesh tell us that it is just too easy to be saved by faith alone. So, they tell us that we have to **do** something to be saved; good, old-fashioned works righteousness. You’ve heard these traditions of men. You know them. Don’t drink booze, or play cards, and certainly don’t dance. Don’t eat meat on Friday, pray to Mary, and do all kinds of good works, and then maybe, just maybe, you will get to go to heaven. Islam says you have to do 5 things -- confess “There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet;” say prayers 5 times each day; pay alms; fast during month of Ramadan and make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Do these five things and you just might enter Paradise. And of course, the President, Prophet, and Seer in Salt Lake City says wear the correct undergarments,

don't drink coffee, and you will be the god of your own planet someday. That is, if you are male. If you are a wife, you better hope your husband will call your name so you can join him on his planet. Honestly, I don't know, and I've never gotten an answer to my question of what happens to you if your husband doesn't call your name. I'm not kidding about that.

What do all of these have in common? They are the traditions of men. They are **not** the Commandments of God. They are telling lies about God and breaking the 2nd Commandment.

To say that faith alone does not save, that you still have to do something to be saved, is a lie of the devil. It is an abuse against the 2nd Commandment. It is a mixing of Law and Gospel. It is teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. More than anything else, it destroys the Gospel of Christ. Paul writes to the Christians in Galatia, those saints attacked by the lies of the Judaizers teaching as doctrine the commandment of men, "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Ga 2:21).

In our Lutheran Confessions, our Lutheran Fathers confessed this great truth of Scripture, "We do not merit the forgiveness of sins or grace by celebrating human traditions" (AC XV 3).² We don't need more rules. We don't need more commandments. We need grace. We need the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

How are we saved? By faith in Jesus – **alone** -- because our Savior did for us what we could not do for ourselves -- He made us holy before God. In our Epistle, Paul teaches us,

"Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the

word, so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Ep 5:26-28).

“It is finished” (Jn 19:30). Christ has finished all that needed to be done for our salvation. Nothing more needs to be done.

This is what Scripture clearly teaches, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast,” St. Paul writes (Ep 2:8-9). And again, the Bible says, “we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ ... because by the works of the law no one will be justified” (Ga 2:16).

We must firmly hold to the teaching of justification by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith because it is the chief article of the Christian faith which distinguishes Christianity from all false religions and it alone give enduring comfort to penitent sinners³.

III. What happens when we leave the commandments of God to hold to the traditions of men? Several things:

1. The Gospel is obscured. The Gospel is the Good News of the life and salvation that we have in Jesus. But, when the focus of our religion is what I must do or what I must not do, our faith becomes all about me and our foundation is no longer Christ.
2. The 10 Commandments of God, which teach us what a holy, God-pleasing life is, are not given their proper place in the Christian faith and life because the traditions of men become more important.

If we can define what a holy God-pleasing life is in any way that each of us wants, then they focus is not going to be on God and what He wants. And, if I do what I think something is holy and you don’t, it is so easy for us

to become a Pharisee and think that I am a better Christian than you are.

3. And, there is great danger to your faith and conscience. It is impossible to keep all the rules, the traditions, the commandments of men. When the focus of your faith is always yourself -- you are always left asking, "Have I done enough? Have I been good enough?" And, your heart will never rest; your conscience will have peace. How true are the words of St. Augustine, "O Lord, our souls come from Thee, and they know no rest until they rest in Thee."

Faith always trusts, always hopes, always rejoices in Jesus alone.
Amen.

¹McCain, Paul Timothy et al., eds, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions; A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), 390, hereafter McCain.

²McCain, 214.

³"An Explanation of the Small Catechism," *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008), 167.