

Sermon: 13th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Mark 7:1-13 (vv.7-8) – Clean and unclean

Theme: The Commands of God x The Traditions of men

Goal: To cling to God's promises only to obtain our salvation.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: We all come from different traditions: cultural traditions, tribal traditions, language traditions, family traditions... Which tradition is the best one? Or which is the right one? Several discussion and fights between people begin because of traditional differences.

Every church has a strong traditional background. The country of origin of a church, the first leaders and martyrs, language, some events in the history, determine a specific and traditional way of worship and even the liturgy and hymns. How much does a tradition affect the core (the heart) of a church?

Are you a traditional Christian? Of course you are, as I myself am. What is the role of tradition in our Christian life? Does it guide our lives? Are our traditions according to God's will or do they contradict it?

I – Jesus and tradition

The church at Jesus' time was a very traditional and conservative church. Besides God's commands, the Pharisees had set lots of laws and rules for the daily life. Most of them were more important than God's Commands. Rules about clothing, food, hygiene, holidays, family were followed “point for point” by the faithful Jews.

Two of these traditions are mentioned in our text. The first one is about washing hands before eating. It was not just a matter of hygiene, but it was a matter of ceremonial washing: maybe a Jew had touched an impure Gentile or something impure according to their laws, and

therefore they had to follow the rules to clean themselves from outside impurity. This was necessary because they considered themselves better and purer than others. And they thought that doing this, their place in God's kingdom was guaranteed. They tried to please God by obedience to all the human rules they had created; but their hearts were far from God and full of envy, greed and pride.

These Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples because they were eating without practicing the ceremonial washing.

The other tradition has to do with the care for the elderly parents. They had a law that allowed them to promise to the church as a gift what they would spend to take care of their elderly parents. This means: they were not obligated to care for their elderly because they had given an offering to the church.

Jesus condemns both practices and calls them hypocrites, quoting from the Book of Isaiah: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.” And Jesus comments: “You have let go of the command of God and are holding on to the tradition of men.”

II – We and traditions

This is a hard warning to us and to the churches of our time. Abortion is supported by NGOs and by governments, when the Law of God says: *You shall not kill*. Marital unfaithfulness and divorce become something usual, when the Law of God says: *You shall not commit adultery*. Corruption in large and in small scales fills the newspapers, when God's Law says: *You shall not steal*. Homosexuality is fashionable and churches are giving their blessing to such kind of couples, when God created one man to one woman. Children are ruling over their parents, when God's Law says: *Honor your father and mother*. Churches are splitting due to disputes on tradition and language.

Tradition shall not divide people. If there are good traditions, they have to be respected. We cannot ignore them, and usually they are

good. But we have to examine them always in the light of God's commands, whether they are not against God's will, or whether they are more important for us than the Word of God.

III – The true cleansing

We have to be aware that neither tradition nor obedience to God's Law can take us to heaven; because traditions are human teachings, and we cannot obey God's law 100% to be saved. Salvation belongs to the Lord and is given by grace to those who believe in Jesus. He is the only One who can cleanse us, not just from the dust and dirt of the market or of the road, but He can cleanse our heart from all unrighteousness. What we cannot do, He does for us, by grace and out of love. He forgives our sins when we confess them to God and believe that He forgives us for the sake of Christ. He guides us on His right paths of justice and love.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians 5:25-26 (the Epistle for today): “Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.” This is the Baptism. Peter explains more in his letter (1 Peter 3:21-22): “This water... now saves you also—(it is) not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand.”

Cleansed by God’s grace in Christ, we now live a godly life according to God's commands respecting our good traditions. I like traditions and we have to preserve good traditions. But we cannot allow traditions to disturb our fellowship as Christians, to rule over God's commands, or to be cause of divisions.

Conclusion: We are celebrating the wedding of Leslie and Mavis today. It is not usual for a couple to marry at that age (88 and 68 year old). We all are happy with them! Why did they decide to get married? Is it just a good tradition of our society and of the church, or is it God's will?

It is God's will that a man and a woman come together and live together under God's blessing. The text we heard from Ephesians 5:22-33 today was not chosen by me; it is one of the readings for this Sunday according to our Church Calendar. Coincidence? A good and blessed coincidence! Paul quotes Genesis when he speaks about the common life of a couple at home. Let's go back to Genesis 2:18, where God said: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable to him.” This is the first reason why God instituted the marriage! Leslie and Mavis came together some years ago, and when they joined the church some months ago, they decided to make their union official. Their official wedding was on Friday, and they are receiving God's blessing to their wedding today. They wanted to accomplish God's will as a testimony of their faith and of their new life in Christ.

This is an example to all couples here present. Man and wife come from different family traditions and bring these traditions to the new home they form when they marry. Sometimes these customs and traditions are reasons for discussion and quarreling. I can remember when Lidia and I were just married, how many different items we had to discuss because we came from different backgrounds and traditions. But, love over all, traditions were not the most important issue in our lives. And we will complete 40 years of happy and blessed life together next January, God willing.

When it comes to the question of traditions, let us first look to God's love in Christ and to His will to save everyone. May traditions be never cause of split among us, but a matter of respect and unity in Christ. We are members of Christ's body, and each member is different from each other. United in Him, we look forward to the perfect fellowship in heaven by God's grace. Amen.

(Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, Cape Town, 26.08.2012)