



Face the Issue:

A church congregation gives all its third graders their own Bible. They are called up to the front of the church, where the presentation is made. On one such occasion, the pastor explained that giving third graders a Bible each year is one of the traditions of this congregation. Then he asked, “What is a tradition?” One sharp third grader responded, “It’s something we always do.”

In his sermon, Jeremy shared that Jesus had some of His sharpest criticisms for the Pharisees. This group had replaced true worship with tradition. Their idea of worshipping God was based on outward, non-authentic rituals and not on an inner relationship.

At the same time, Jesus was a practicing Jew of His time. He went to the synagogue and the temple, He read and quoted from the Torah, and he prayed the Psalms. As a good Jew, he would have recited the shema twice daily: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”.

Jesus appears to be a “traditional” person, yet He was not tradition-bound. Instead, He got right to the heart of the matter, that true worship was loving God and neighbor. He said he didn’t come to throw out the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them. Jesus did, in fact, fulfill the heart of the Old Testament law—love of God and neighbor—in His life and death, His teaching and ministry.

As Jeremy shared, His criticism of the Pharisees was that they were placing an outward appearance of following the rules above an inner motivation of love of God and others. How can we prevent following the same dangerous path?

What are some practices of your family, such as ways you celebrate Christmas or other special times? How meaningful are they to you? Sometimes do they seem like dead ritual? What would be lost if you were to drop them?

What are some things our congregation always does as a means of being faithful to Christ? What would be lost if we were to drop them?

Into the Word:

Read Mark 7:1–8

By the time Jesus came along, the Jewish religious establishment—the rabbis and what the Gospel writers refer to as the scribes and Pharisees—had developed rules for everything from personal hygiene to conduct on the Sabbath to charity work. The intention of these rules and regulations was good—to help people follow the will of God as they understood it and to keep people from being lured by the temptations of the world. But these rules and regulations gave people the sense that salvation could be earned by simply following the rules.

Jesus did not feel bound by these rules and regulations, which often got Him into trouble with the Pharisees. His disciples were accused of disregarding the ritual washing of hands before eating. At other times He or his disciples were accused of inappropriate behavior on the Sabbath, such as harvesting grain or healing, which were forbidden by rabbinic law. In relation to Sabbath rules, Jesus said: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath". In other words, the Sabbath was created by God for the well being of humans, but the rabbinic rules governing it made the Sabbath a burden to humans. Jesus' pointed criticism of the scribes and Pharisees was that they had let go of the commands of God and were holding on to the traditions of men.

Here, in the Bible Belt, we have many congregations that seem to have the motto: "We've never done it that way before!" Why do churches tend to resist change, "new light," or new ways of doing things?

According to Christ, what is the ultimate criteria for deciding if something is true worship of God and not a selfish act based on outward appearance?

The fact that Jesus did hold on to traditions indicates that they do have value and should not be completely abandoned. Looking at the criticisms of the Pharisees that Jeremy shared with us and what Jesus said in Mark 7, what distinguishes a tradition from being just going through the motions in an outward display of "worship" and the tradition being a true expression of worship to God?

Apply your answer to something that you consider a tradition at church. What are two motivations for doing this tradition that fit the criteria of outward appearance and inner expression of love?

Apply The Word

There was a time when many evangelical churches tended to be legalistic, which gave rise to the quip: "Don't drink, don't chew, don't go with girls that do." Now there are calls that many churches are going too far in the opposite direction, where we hardly keep each other accountable to standards of holiness, modesty, and sobriety?

If Jesus came to our church, would he preach against legalism or against taking freedom in Christ too far?

As we continue in this series on worship, we should all look at our motivations for doing what we do. We should pray that the Holy Spirit will reveal to us the times when our worship and the traditions that we have are not motivated by the Love for God and others.