

One of the Devil's Pitchforks

Mark 7:1-9

By Carl MacMurray

In the religious arena of our society today there seems to be an increasing emphasis on church customs and tradition. For many centuries the Roman Catholic church has taught that their church traditions carries as much authority as God's word (the Bible) itself. But, even in other groups we are beginning to hear more often the explanation for some religious practice in question is, "that's the way we've always done it." Perhaps this desire to do what others have done before us proceeds from those who are insecure spiritually in the fast-paced, changing world that we live in and who want some type of solidity in their lives. Maybe it comes from a growing lack of interest in the scriptures that leads some to just take the easy road of following a perceived crowd rather than searching out God's way for themselves. Wherever it comes from, however, we all need to recognize the inherent danger in following church traditions (what others have done) and building on their mistakes rather than learning for ourselves what God desires for us.

In Mark 7, a three-pronged pitchfork of error is revealed for men to get stuck on, when the Pharisees came to Jesus to find out why His disciples were eating with unwashed hands. Verses 3-4 explain clearly that it was not God's law that was being violated here, but the "traditions of the elders". Jesus' response was to identify the Pharisees as hypocrites (v.6) since they claimed to be teachers of God's law, but were teaching men's traditions instead. He then points out the dangers in "traditions".

First of all, our Lord quotes Isaiah in saying... "In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men", Mk.7:7. The most obvious danger in teaching men's precepts is that it makes our worship "vain", i.e. empty, worthless, of no use. No matter what right and proper worship we offer up, it becomes a waste of time and effort if it is mixed with the laws of men. It seems that God will allow no watering down or distortion of His will. He wants what He says He wants.... period. When some tried this in the Galatian church, the apostle Paul said they had "deserted Christ" by "distorting the gospel" (New American Stand. Ver.). God also promises severe consequences in Revelation 22:18-19 for any do presumptuous as to "add" or "take from" His word. It just doesn't seem to me that there could be any doctrine or tradition of man that is so helpful that it would be worth the above consequences.

Secondly, Jesus points out the dangerous din of misplaced emphasis. He said, "neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." Certainly men who are so pleased with their own ideas that they would teach them as fact are going to

focus on those same ideas to the exclusion of God's will. If they were not impressed with God's word in the first place, they certainly will not give it the preeminent place in their hearts it deserves. A good example of this can be seen in Acts 20:7, where we see that Christians met on the first day of the week to eat the Lord's supper. This is God's directions, in His word, under the guidance of inspired apostles on eating the body and blood of Christ. As a rule, this instruction is generally ignored or neglected as folks eat the Lord's supper at weddings, any and every day of the week, or even skip it weeks on end to eat it once per quarter or every six months, or even annually. While this scriptural pattern is ignored, notice how many strive each year to honor Jesus' birth at Christmas. An admittedly, man-made tradition that no early Christian ever kept and God never asked for is being given more honor and respect than God's plain directions for remembering the sacrifice of His son. Exalting man's ideas and neglecting God's seems to be out natural course.

Thirdly, the end result of honoring men's traditions is revealed in v.9. Jesus said, "You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition." This is the end of it all. God's desires are not only neglected, they are "set aside" so that men can do as they please. This can be seen in churches on all sides where "going into all the world" has been replaced by "going into the church kitchen" or "going into the church softball league". The "burial" and "likeness of Christ's death" (Romans 6:4-5) in baptism has been "set aside" for sprinkling in baptism. Simple congregational autonomy has been replaced by multi-million dollar, organized, denominational frameworks running insurance companies, hospitals, wineries, and stock brokering.

Almost 2,000 years later, Jesus' voice still echoes... "hypocrites". "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me", Mark 7:6-7. Let me encourage all believers not to get "hung up" on the Devil's pitchfork of trusting tradition. Cod's word is the only thing that can give us that eternal home we seek, Acts 20:32. God bless your efforts.

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