

ADDICTED TO TRADITION

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Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, saying, "Why do your disciples disobey the tradition of the elders? For they don't wash their hands when they eat bread." He answered them, "Why do you also disobey the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever may tell his father or his mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have gotten from me is a gift devoted to God,' he shall not honor his father or mother.' You have made the commandment of God void because of your tradition. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, 'These people draw near to me with their mouth, And honor me with their lips; But their heart is far from me. And in vain do they worship me, Teaching as doctrine rules made by men.'"

Matthew 15:1-9 WEB

Religious tradition isn't bad, except when it substitutes for what's more important. In the example above, Jesus condemned a traditional Pharisee practice of allowing adult children to avoid financial responsibilities to their parents by claiming that any discretionary funds were dedicated to God (meaning the temple domination system) and thus not available for the parents.

Jesus considered this a serious sin because the law (Ten Commandments) so clearly ordered people to honor their parents with love, respect, and financial support if needed. So what the temple authorities were really doing was disobeying the commandment of God because of their tradition, or as Jesus charged later, "You have made the commandment of God void because of your tradition," and you are "Teaching as doctrine rules made by men."

This all began when Pharisee leaders asked Jesus why his disciples violated the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands when eating. So to them appearances were far more important than justice, as was revealed in Jesus's answer.

Do we in the Christian church ever make the word of God of no effect by our traditions? Do we teach for doctrines the commandments of men? Perhaps we do, but I think it's not so much what we do, but what we don't do. Our sins are more those of omission than of commission. I mean that our traditions often fail to allow for certain principles of scripture. They act as if these didn't exist. Hence we hear little preaching on them, seldom consider them in devotions, and generally ignore them in worship.

Yes, I'm speaking specifically of the thousands of commands requiring us not only to serve and support indigent, vulnerable, and powerless groups within our society, but also to strongly advocate against the political and economic power systems allowing such abuse. There is no stronger message in Scripture.

One such command is found in Proverbs 31:8-9: "Open your mouth for the mute, In the cause of all who are left desolate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, And serve justice to the poor and needy." This is not merely a wish by God, it is an imperative for his people. It involves much more than mere charity since it orders us to speak out in the cause of justice---not just for the oppressed, but also against the oppressors. It involves more than individuals because it includes any group--- homeless, poor, those without medical care, those lacking education---that is desolate because of their socio-economic position. And it also includes any group---central bankers, mortgage lenders, white collar criminals, and even governments--- doing the oppressing.

If you consider your religion to be mainly aimed at making parishioners feel good, then you won't be very interested in doing what God mandates concerning oppression and justice. So by omission you'll be doing exactly what Christ accused the Pharisees of. Next time you repeat a prayer of confession as part of your liturgy, think about and seriously confess your sins of omission. Think about it.