

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

MARK: TRADITION AND AUTHORITY

MARK 7:1-13

DAVE WAGNER

Last time Jesus revealed his supernatural person by walking on waves, in spite of his disciples' spiritual blindness. Now we return to the theme of conflict which will only increase as the Gospel proceeds. Today's text will be a significant leap forward in that respect.

"In relation to what precedes, however, the beginning of chapter 7 marks an **ominous change...with this new pericope the tension between Jesus and the religious leadership rises to a new level of mutual repudiation, and Jesus deliberately fuels the fire with a more radical pronouncement even than his controversial comments on the Sabbath.**"

In this story we have two big issues at play: Cleanness and Authority, and Jesus disagrees with the Jewish leaders on both. Incidentally, the story which follows about the woman from Tyre will also concern the issue of cleanness, especially as it functioned as a dividing wall between Jew and Gentile:

"The narrative which follows in 7.24-30 is also closely linked to this theme (purity), but it's formally distinct character requires separate treatment."

"It is hardly a coincidence that in the narrative which follows Jesus himself moves outside Jewish territory and begins to exercise his ministry among the non-Jews. The controversy over ritual purity, with its radical implications for the status of food laws which divide Jew and Gentile, thus appropriately acts as the narrative **hinge between the Jewish and Gentile phases of Jesus' ministry in the north...**"

THE TEXT

We begin our story with a group of Pharisees and scribes coming to Jesus to confront him.

"The sinister significance of this incident with regard to the future development of the story is seen in the fact that the source of opposition to Jesus is now not the local scribal leadership but, as in 3.22, a delegation from Jerusalem."

These Jewish leaders take issue with Jesus because they witness his disciples eating without first ceremonially washing their hands. Now this ceremonial washing before a meal was not something required by the OT; rather it was an obligation imposed by the Jewish oral law, which was a growing body of teaching which sought to apply Moses' Law to every area of life.

"...**the only hand washing required in the OT for purposes of ritual purity is that of the priests before offering sacrifice (Ex 30.18-21).** The extension of this principle to the eating of ordinary food, and to Jewish people other than priests, was a matter of scribal development, and it is uncertain how far it had progressed by the time of Jesus. It is unlikely that ritual hand washing was yet the norm among ordinary people, and it may well be that what the Pharisees were here expecting of Jesus and his disciples was their own distinctive practice."

"Rituals concerning cleanness and uncleanness reflect rabbinic developments more than actual Torah prescriptions. According to the OT, only priests were required to **wash before entering the tabernacle...otherwise the washing of hands...was** prescribed only if one had touched a bodily discharge. As Judaism's encounter with Gentile culture increased in the postexilic period, however, the question of ritual cleanliness took on a new significance as a way of maintaining Jewish purity over against Gentile culture."

Additionally, we must be clear on the Jewish purpose for this hand washing. Moderns immediately think about germs in this context, but hygiene was not the first concern of either the OT ceremonial cleansings or the Jewish oral law.

"It is important to understand that cleanness was not limited to or even primarily concerned with matters of hygiene, nor are distinctions between clean and unclean entirely understandable on the basis of rational explanation alone. The Mishnah, for instance, declared that the Aramaic sections of Daniel and Ezra rendered the hands of anyone who touched them unclean, as did the Holy Scriptures themselves if they were translated into Assyrian. On the other hand, translating the Aramaic sections of Scripture into Hebrew made them clean...This text is one of many instances indicating that cleanness was a ritual or cultic distinction as opposed to a practical or hygienic distinction. To be sure, many Torah prescriptions regarding cleanness and defilement did promote hygiene, but the practical effect of avoiding germs or contagion was not their only or even their primary concern. For moderns reared in a world of empirical realities, this may be difficult to grasp. One way to convey the power of the Jewish distinction between clean and unclean, perhaps, is to draw a parallel with authoritarian societies and organizations, where people avoid all contact with a person who is under suspicion or who has been fired, for example, so as not to endanger their own position."

"If you touch a reptile, you may not be dirty, but you are unclean. If you undergo a ritual immersion, you may not be free of dirt, but you are clean. A corpse can make you unclean, though it may not make you dirty. A rite of purification involving the sprinkling of water mixed with the ashes of a red heifer probably will not remove a great deal of dirt, but it will remove the impurity."

Now just how important was this issue for first century Jews? It would be hard to overestimate the importance they attached to this matter as a cultural badge of their unique identity as God's people.

"The food laws of Leviticus 11 and 17, and the whole concept of ritual purity which underlies them, were of central importance to Jewish culture and identity. Together with the right of circumcision and their observance of Sabbath, the literal adherence to these dietary laws served to mark out the Jews as the distinctive people of God, and to separate them socially from other people. The sharing of meals is one of the most basic forms of social integration, and these laws effectively made it impossible for Jews to share in meals prepared by non-Jews. While the issue raised in v2 is at the relatively inoffensive level of ritual washing before meals (a matter on which Jews themselves held different views), by his pronouncement in v15 Jesus deliberately widens the discussion to include this ritual separation which constituted one of the badges of Jewish national identity."

"Jacob Neusner notes that the dominant trait of Pharisaism before 70AD, as depicted both in rabbinic tradition and the Gospels, concerns conditions regarding ritual purity. It is worth remembering that fully twenty five percent of the Mishnah is devoted to questions of purity. Archeological excavations continue to discover Jewish Mikvaot or cleaning pools that were a standard feature of Jewish homes and settlements in the first century."

This may all seem fairly irrelevant for us, and in the particular issue of dietary cleanness it probably is. It was not so, however, for the early church; in fact, this issue of dietary cleanness takes up an impressive amount of space in the NT:

"Once the Christian movement came to include significant numbers of non-Jews, it was inevitable that the food laws would become a matter of existential importance, as their literal persistence would make table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians impossible. Both in Acts and in the Pauline letters we see the sensitivity of the issue."

But further, as we'll explain later on, while dietary cleanness is not much of an issue for present day western Christians, there are other issues in which we find

ourselves bumping up against problems based on principles similar to those Jesus faces in our story. More about that later on.

Verses 3-4 are Mark's parenthetical explanation for non-Jewish readers about the Jewish custom in question. The point is that the Jews (or at least the Jewish leaders, such as the Pharisees and scribes) adhere to strict cleanness laws concerning meals and articles such as cups and pots. Mark tells us they do this in obedience to the "tradition of the elders."

This tradition of the elders was a body of oral teaching which eventually was recorded in the Jewish document called Mishnah, around 200AD. The rabbis of Jesus' time taught that when Moses was on Mount Sinai, God gave him two laws: The written law we know as "Torah" (our Pentateuch) and the oral law which is the tradition of the elders. This body of oral teaching grew and evolved even past the time of Jesus, it seems. It was essentially an extension of Moses' law, and sought to apply biblical commands to every possible situation not expressly covered in the Bible. So, for example, while the OT only recorded a handful of prohibitions concerning Sabbath (such as not cooking, not working, not travelling far from home) the oral law eventually came to include some 1,500 Sabbath laws, prescribing endless rules for every possible situation pertaining to Sabbath.

Now the oral law is an important element of NT history to understand. In fact, while the issue of ceremonial purity is important in our story, it is after all only a test case for a deeper issue; that is the issue of authority. The Pharisees held the elder tradition to be authoritative, as much so as the OT. Jesus rejected this idea and held only to the OT writings.

"The oral tradition, which was the defining element of Pharisaic and rabbinic Judaism, is in the present pericope categorically nullified."

"The contention between Jesus and the Pharisees over clean and unclean was...**symptomatic of a deeper cleavage, the crux of which** concerned the tradition

of the elders...[the] Pharisees accepted the evolving oral law as equally authoritative...rabbis promoted the idea that Moses had received two laws on Mt. Sinai, the written Torah and the oral Mishnah...The Torah alone, according to advocates of the oral tradition, was believed to be too ambiguous to establish and govern the Jewish community. The oral tradition as preserved in the Mishnah, on the other hand, prescribed in infinite detail how the intent of the Torah ought to be fulfilled in actual circumstances."

"The oral tradition, at least in theory, intended to express the intent of the law and extend it to matters of everyday life. In practice, however, the tradition of the elders tended to shift the center of gravity from the intent of the Torah to an increasing array of peripheral matters that either obscured or perverted that intent. It is this latter effect that falls under Jesus' withering critique..."

It is also important to note, from v4, that this issue of extending the purity laws far beyond Moses' Law in the development of oral law was not at all an isolated case. Rather, this was normal operating procedure for the Pharisees and scribes. As we'll see in a moment, in the case of Corban, the Pharisees applied this method to many areas of God's law, with the result of nullifying both specific commands ("honor your parents") and the general intent of the law.

The actual charge against Jesus comes in v5. In v6, Jesus responds by pointing out these Pharisees as the people against whom Isaiah spoke when Isaiah condemned the impious Jews of his day. Now whether Jesus specifically sees Isaiah's comment as predictive is uncertain. Either way, the force of Jesus' comment is to line the Pharisees up with their apostate ancestors:

"This 'contemporizing' use of OT texts is typical of much NT interpretation, and presupposes a typological understanding of continuity in the relationship between God and his people such that earlier events and situations appropriately serve as models for a later era of fulfillment, even though in themselves they had no predictive force."

The Isaianic charge is basically that the Pharisees' worship of God is merely external, and thus worthless, all because they are teaching human commands as if they were from God. This is a common prophetic charge in the OT:

"The contrast in Isaiah between lips and heart...reflects an important prophetic theme...and corresponds to the charge elsewhere in the gospels that scribal religion is more concerned with external correctness than with fundamental attitudes and relationship to God...The priority of the internal over the external will be picked up as the focus of the alternative approach commended by Jesus...where the word *kardia*(heart) will recur prominently in vv.19 and 21...rules and regulations based on merely human authority do not provide the sort of response which God requires of his people."

The Isaiah quote is exactly appropriate to the situation. The Pharisees, like apostate Israel before them, reject God's commands and replace them with human commands which they prefer. In v8 Jesus seems to be remarking that the tradition of the elders is nothing more than the tradition of men, and therefore invalid as a source of religious authority. If so, then the whole charge of the Pharisees against Jesus crumbles.

In v9 Jesus accuses the Pharisees with strong sarcasm, as if to say, "Your nullifying of God's law is just beautiful!" What follows is a specific example from Jesus about how the Pharisees used the oral law (which they claimed was a fence to protect God's law) in order to nullify God's law. What Jesus has in mind concerns the fifth commandment to honor one's parents, and Jesus reinforces his point by also quoting the OT direction that any son who cursed his parents should be executed.

Now in order to grasp what follows, we need to understand that contained within the command of honoring one's parents is the act of financially supporting one's parents in their old age.

So, against God's law, the Pharisees held to a provision called "Corban" (meaning "devoted to God") by which a son could "dedicate" his property to the temple so as to retain control of it but keep his parents from having any claim on it for support in their old age. By upholding this provision the Jews nullified the fifth commandment.

"Corban, from the Hebrew word for 'offering,' was a rabbinic custom derived from **the practice of devoting particular goods to the Lord...Corban was similar to the concept of deferred giving.** Today a person may will property to a charity or institution at his or her death, though retaining possession over the property and the proceeds or interest accruing from it until then. In the case of Corban, a person could dedicate goods to God and withdraw them from ordinary use, although **retaining control over them himself...a son declares his property Corban, which at his death would pass into the possession of the temple.** In the meantime, however, the son retains control over the property - and his control deprives his parents of the support that otherwise would have been derived from the property in their old age...'A man goes through the formality of devoting something to God, not that he may give it to God, but in order to prevent some other person from having it.'"

"No doubt this provision, once introduced, would then be justified by the scriptural principle of not breaking an oath or vow, without enquiring whether the vow had been an appropriate one in the first place."

After all the religious pretense and show, the simple and plain effect of such elements of the oral law was to invalidate God's word; this is what Jesus is attacking in this passage, though the purity issue and the Corban issue are cases in point.

THEOLOGY

The main theological issue in this text is Authority, which has been helpfully defined as the right to rule. The question in our text concerns where the authority for God's people (and all people, ultimately) lies; does it lie in Scripture alone, as

Jesus believes, or do Scripture and the Jewish oral tradition share authority? Whenever someone tells someone else to do something, and the one being commanded responds, "Why should I do that? Who says?" the issue of authority is being raised. In this case we are concerned with religious authority, which is the highest possible authority, since no authority could rise higher than God. The question is where we are to find the expression of God's authority, whether in Scripture alone or in Scripture plus the Jewish oral tradition (or anything else, ultimately, such as alleged new books of Scripture, direct revelations, the Catholic pope or Mormon prophet, Muhammad and the Koran, new scientific theories and philosophies, etc).

It is easy to see from our text that Jesus disallows the Jewish oral tradition as a revelation of divine authority. He calls it the traditions of men, by which he seems to mean, "of mere men," and thus it is not qualified to function as a revelation of divine authority. Of course we cannot see from this text whether Jesus might allow any other document or thing to function as authoritative revelation; however, a study of the rest of the NT shows that both Jesus and his apostles believed that the only authoritative revelations are contained in the OT and the NT writings of the apostles. No other alleged revelation, and no other document was allowed as of divine authority at any level, and certainly not on par with or superior to the old and new testaments.

What our text does for us is reveal some points concerning the practice of adding another authority to Scripture, in this case the Jewish oral tradition. This subject is relevant to Christians at all points in history as we are constantly faced with insiders and outsiders alike who, whether knowingly or unknowingly, seek to add some other document or source of authority to the Scriptures, making their new source equal to Scripture, in theory, though as is discussed below the new source of authority very often becomes superior to Scripture in practice if not in theory. Following are seven points in consideration of this issue.

1. If you admit another authority, that authority will likely not become set in stone; it will continue to grow and develop and your center of authority will always be changing, which is sort of the same as having no authority at all, or being your own authority, or making your authority the changing circumstances around you.
2. If you admit another authority, almost inevitably it will eventually become the real authority over Scripture; witness Rome, Mormons and Liberals, all of which began by allowing some other source of authority to be at least equal with the Scriptures but have developed to the point that their new source is held as a higher authority than Scripture.
3. Shifting our authority results in hypocrisy and merely outward worship. In part this is probably because as soon as we allow our own interpretations to become part of the authority structure, it is inevitable that we will start to modify God's revealed will to better suit our own preferences. We are then partly obeying God and partly obeying ourselves. If this develops far enough eventually we are only obeying ourselves. But all the while we maintain an outward show of doing all we do in obedience to God's law, for his glory. The result is a thorough commitment to do our own will, not God's, while retaining a form of worship to God, i.e. religious hypocrisy.
4. Following from the last point, it isn't hard to see why Isaiah and Jesus would say this practice makes our worship vain or worthless. In this case the people of God go from a sincere worship of God, expressed through daily obedience to his commands with faith and love, to a daily worship of self, expressed through obedience to human commands, with faith and love for ourselves. We then transport this modified worship into our religious activities, covering it all with a veneer of worshiping God. But God won't accept this worship because it is only formally directed to him; in reality it is directed to ourselves. All this from making up our own laws and commands and adding them to Scripture. We should note such addition creates a dynamic reality in which the adding leads on to worse

conditions where eventually our worship is totally worthless. It is dynamic in that it likely will not stop at merely adding a few extra commands. The center of authority will shift, and if allowed full development, eventually we will be nullifying God's commands in order to keep our own, resulting in worthless worship.

5. So we can also say it is impossible for mere men to construct and deliver religious commands. Men, such as law enforcement or government officials do have the right to develop and deliver non-religious laws for the ordering of society (though even here we should note that the further such laws get from the principles of divine revelation, the worse they become and the less we are obligated to obey). No man has the right to develop and deliver religious laws to bind the consciences of other men. Man can never be the source of such laws; it is the God's prerogative to be this source alone. The tradition of the elders was nothing more than the tradition of men; it did not possess divine authority and no similarly man-made laws from any other time period possess that religious authority.

6. We should also note the tendency of man-made laws to emphasize ritual observance. Notice how much weight the Pharisees put on washing their hands while they neglected serious moral issues such as justice, mercy and faithfulness. One of my personal favorites is when the Jewish leaders have rigged a trial to get an innocent man (Jesus) handed over to capital punishment, but they refuse to enter the governor's headquarters because they don't want to be defiled! The tendency often is for men to put all their emphasis on the ritual aspect of religion, not the moral. Why? I suggest because the ritual costs so much less than the moral. If I desire to live in sin, but still want to retain the sense of being right with God, I can achieve that by committing all kinds of evil through the week and then coming to service, or confession, or whatever, and performing the ritual which clears my account. The ritual costs very little, or nothing. But the same could not be said if someone approached religion in terms of its moral and spiritual aspects. I cannot determine to live morally and spiritually and retain my sinful lifestyle through the week, for the two are mutually exclusive. To live morally/spiritually is the same as

to not live sinfully; the two cannot coexist comfortably like sin and ritual religion can. And so those who desire to feel right with God, and to appear right with God to others, but who still want to live in rebellion, find a convenient arrangement in putting all the weight on the ritual aspect of religion, as opposed to the moral/spiritual aspect.

7. Another consideration for us is the danger of attempting to fence God's commands with human commands, even though the motivation behind such an attempt may be to protect God's commands from being broken. This was the rationale given by some of the Jewish teachers who affirmed the oral law. The idea was to make certain no one came even close to breaking God's law by building a fence of human laws around God's law. God says not to work on Sabbath; in order to protect this law from being broken, we will forbid men from even picking things up on Sabbath, so that they will not even approach working. This idea may sound good initially, but really it is a dangerous procedure, as we see from the evils which eventually came from the Jewish oral tradition, which was used as a fence around God's law. As we saw above, this practice has the effect of shifting the center of authority from God's commands to human commands. But in fact it also forbids things God does not forbid, and claims divine authority for that forbidding; it is actually a falsehood. If I say God said, "Thou shalt not do X," and God didn't say that, I am lying or mistaken and am passing along a falsehood. This alone is bad and destructive. But notice the destructiveness goes further in that if X should have been forbidden then God would have forbidden it; as it is X should not be forbidden, it should be allowed, and we know because God allowed it. So if we forbid X we are really forbidding something men should be permitted to do and in many cases the results will be unhealthy, sometimes even sinful or dangerous. Rome forbids its priests from marrying. This certainly results in many men without the gift for singleness being forced into singleness; can there be any doubt the result is damage and sinfulness in men which would be prevented if the prohibition were removed? And so what we often have are fence laws which either cause men to

break God's laws in themselves (Corban) or which increase the likelihood men will break those laws (Roman celibacy, in consideration of the prohibitions of lust and immorality). A familiar example of this comes in more recent prohibitions of Baptist churches against dancing, drinking and playing cards. I once asked an older Baptist why playing cards could ever be prohibited, as I was mystified about what evil they could see in it. They told me it wasn't the card playing but the atmosphere which typically accompanied it which they were attempting to avoid in past decades. Now I appreciate the attempt, and I do believe there would be times when, for a limited time, some non-moral practice should be prohibited because of presenting circumstances (for example, if my son desired to go to college wearing rainbow colored clothing, this is a point in history where I would not allow him to do so, despite the fact wearing rainbow colored clothing is morally irrelevant). However, for anyone to suppose that playing cards is therefore a moral offense and should be prohibited until the second coming is not only false but dangerous. For a time and in certain scenarios? Certainly possible. But as soon as we can we want to liberate the good things God gave us (playing-cards, rainbows) from their currently out-of-bounds status. I think playing-cards are certainly ready to be liberated. I pray rainbows will not be far behind. But the point here is that fence laws don't work, and even cause men to sin, and are actually falsehoods.

APPLICATION

1. We should never give a religious command not clearly found in Scripture. By religious command I refer to a command given as if it came from God. "You shall not murder" is a religious command and a valid one, clearly taught in Scripture; every person on earth is right to speak it and every person on earth obligated to obey it. "You shall not play cards", if given as a command from God, is a command which should not be given and ought not to be obeyed, all other things being equal. Of course there are non-religious commands we are right to give, such as when I tell my kids to clean their room, or the law enforcement officer tells me to pull over.

2. We must believe, teach, and live out Sola Scriptura, the principle which says only the Bible is authoritative for religious belief and practice. Confessions and creeds are only good as far as they accurately deliver the truths of Scripture; it is the same for any Christian document ever written.

3. For reformed protestants, we must beware our theology texts do not become another kind of tradition of the elders, albeit unknowingly. Calvin's position on the Lord's Supper may be true, or interesting, or instructive, or worth studying, but it is certainly not binding, unless it is the very teaching of the Bible, in which case the reason we are bound to believe and obey it is precisely because it is the Bible's teaching, not because it is Calvin's. This goes not just for the Lord's Supper and Calvin, but for every possible teaching of every possible person other than the prophets, apostles and Jesus. Now many books of theology, church history, and Christian philosophy are worth studying, and perhaps all have some amount of truth in them. We would be great fools if we did not consult the Christian thought of the last 2,000 years in an effort to better understand the truth. But all these materials must remain in the position of commentary and consultation; it is very easy to begin to make theological and practical decisions, not because Scripture says, but because Augustine says.

4. Now notice something subtle here: Many parts of our theological understanding are direct statements from the Word of God. For example: The statement that Jesus is the Son of God is the Word of God and to disbelieve it is to disbelieve God himself, and is foolish and sinful; everyone is obligated to believe this statement because the Word of God states it. But notice how easy it would be to say something about the idea of Jesus as Son of God, which the Bible does not plainly teach, and then to treat this new statement as if it also were the word of God. This new statement piggy-back's off of the plainly biblical statement that Jesus is the Son of God, and in so doing it is passed off as also the word of God. But realize that the new statement, if not plainly found in Scripture, can only, at best, be considered a possible truth concerning Jesus' sonship; it cannot itself be held to be the actual

word of God just as much as Jesus' sonship is. Or take another example. It is plain biblical teaching that God predestines men to salvation and that men are responsible. We can be as certain of these things as we are of anything. But when a theologian then proceeds to construct an explanation about how these two things fit together, unless his explanation can also be shown to be the plain teaching of Scripture then it must not be passed off as being also the word of God. At best, it should be presented as an unverifiable theory concerning the nature of the relationship between predestination and responsibility. And as such, no man is obligated to believe it. We are obligated to believe predestination and responsibility; we are not obligated to believe human theological constructs which seek to explain their relationship. If the Bible gives us such a construct that is another matter. But any religious doctrine which doesn't come from Scripture does not hold position as the word of God and men are not obligated to believe it as they are obligated to believe the word of God. What this means is we should be very careful that we distinguish between what Scripture plainly teaches and what it does not, and we must never call someone to believe a religious doctrine if not plainly taught in the Bible.