

'Ye Leave the Commandment of God, and Hold Fast the Tradition of Men' Mar 7:8

by G. Campbell Morgan

Jesus teaches that tradition can become a substitute for the law of God and lead people away from God, and that the only way to ensure the full realization of one's life is through direct obedience to the direct law of God.

Scripture: Mark 7:8

Topics: "Tradition vs. Commandment", "True Obedience to God"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the conflict between the commandments of God and the traditions of men, as illustrated in Mark 7:8-9. He critiques the Pharisees for prioritizing human traditions over divine commandments, highlighting how such practices can lead to a departure from true obedience to God. Morgan argues that traditions, while often well-intentioned, can obscure the law of God and hinder genuine spiritual growth. He calls for a return to direct fellowship with God, free from the constraints of human interpretations and traditions. Ultimately, he encourages believers to embrace the freedom found in Christ, which transcends the limitations of tradition.

Transcript

"Ye leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men. . . . Full well do ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your tradition."- Mar 7:8; Mar 7:9.

Mar 7:1-23.

THE narrative of these first twenty-three verses of the seventh chapter of Mark's Gospel stands in striking contrast to that of the last twenty-seven verses of the previous chapter. That was the story of the gathering to the Lord of His apostles. This is the story of the gathering to the Lord of His adversaries. The respective beginnings show this. "And the apostles gather themselves together unto Jesus.

That this story is of special importance there can be no doubt. These men who gathered to the Lord came officially from Jerusalem. The sending out of the twelve had drawn new attention to Jesus, impressing even Herod in the royal palace. The movement in Galilee was evidently growing, and that rapidly. The religious leaders in Jerusalem were perturbed, and sent a deputation to investigate. The occasion of controversy, apparently a trifling one, was nevertheless a most revealing one. In it, the religious ideal for which these men stood, is clearly manifested. The way in which our Lord dealt with them is singularly

arresting in its anger, satire, directness, and scorn; and in that careful explanation of the meaning of His method which He subsequently gave to His disciples. In this incident two opposing ideals of religion are seen coming into conflict; that of the Pharisees and scribes, and that of Jesus. Theirs was that of the punctilious observance of traditions; His was that of simple obedience to the commandment of God. He shocked them in the habits of His disciples; they shocked Him in their disregard of the will of God.

Now there is a sense in which this story does not startle us. This is due to the fact that this whole question of ceremonial washings appears to us as patently futile, and we have a sense of real satisfaction in the way in which our Lord dealt with these men. But in that very feeling of satisfaction there is peril. It may be that our satisfaction results from a very superficial understanding of what our Lord really meant. If we can disengage the elemental principles from the incidental circumstances, we may be startled, perchance, quite as much as these men were.

If our Lord were here to-day in bodily form, He would not say to us the things He said to these men, because we should not say to Him the things they said. But I am not at all sure that He would not shock very many of those who bear His name, not so much by what He would do, as by the apparently religious things He would not do. That method of statement may bring us nearer to the real meaning of this story.

Let us then endeavour to understand this clashing of ideals revealed in the controversy between the deputation from Jerusalem, and Jesus. This we will do by considering, first, the history and intention of tradition; secondly, the genesis of obedience to tradition as Jesus laid it bare on this occasion; and thirdly and finally, the effects of tradition as our Lord revealed them.

It is pertinent therefore to our enquiry that we first simply ask what was meant by tradition upon this occasion, and in this atmosphere. What were these traditions to which our Lord made reference, not here alone, but again and again in the course of His public ministry, always in order to denounce them? They were precepts orally transmitted, illustrating, applying, expounding the written law. Some of the later Jewish teachers of that period claimed that the traditions were orally given by Moses. Earlier teachers had claimed that the traditions came from the elders who were associated with Moses. I am not proposing to argue this matter, but simply say that neither position was warranted.

The history and development of the traditions to which our Lord made reference here, and to which these men themselves made reference, were largely Pharisaic. The whole Pharisaic movement was born in the period of Jewish history, of which we practically have no record in our Bible. It was born, of an intensely religious conviction. It is sometimes said-and the definition is more accurate than we are always willing to admit that-the Pharisees were originally the Puritans of their age. In that period the people had been gathered together and localized at Jerusalem, under different leaders; and Babylonian and Greek influences were threatening altogether the lonely separateness of the Hebrew people. The Pharisees were men who at this time had banded themselves together to maintain, by all means in their power, the distinction between the Jewish people and the nations surrounding them.

There arose at the same time the order of the scribes, who were always associated with the Pharisees. Not all scribes were Pharisees, and not all Pharisees were scribes; but there was the closest association between them. The work of the scribes was that of taking the law of God, illustrating it, and applying it to local circumstances, and local situations. As men enquired: What does the law of God mean for us at this point, or this juncture? the scribes interpreted the law of God.

Gradually they formulated precepts to meet the new conditions. These precepts constantly increased in number, in an attempt to keep pace with the ever-growing complexity of the conditions of life, until there had grown up a great body of traditions; traditions which in the first place were intended to be interpretations of the law, and applications of the law to local circumstances; traditions which in the second place became interpretations of traditions, and applications of traditions; and traditions in the third place, which were interpretations of interpretations of interpretations of traditions! So the movement ran, until there existed between the people of God and the law of God such a mass of tradition, that the law of God itself was out of sight, and practically forgotten.

Into the midst of this ideal of religious life Jesus came. The intention of tradition was that of the maintenance of religion. Here therefore we must make a very necessary distinction, which distinction our Lord made so graphic and patent in the words of our text, between the traditions and the law of God. That distinction must be made even in the highest realm of the consideration of tradition. The law of God must be kept separate and apart, quite alone from any human interpretation of it, which is a tradition. The law was given, and men in such sincere and devout ages, obediently desiring to maintain the law, interpreted the law to men. That was tradition, human tradition, human interpretation of the law.

To leave the Hebrew atmosphere, it may be that some may think this can have very little application to us. Certainly in the beginning of the Christian era, within the Christian Church, there were very few traditions. Those early Christians lived in such close relationship with the first Christian movement, that traditions were very few. That is wonderfully illustrated in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, in which-if there be one thing that is more manifestly and gloriously surprising than another is seen the freedom of life in the Spirit. A particular Church doctrine cannot be based upon the Acts of the Apostles. A formulated creed cannot be found in the Acts of the Apostles. The warrant for any particular liturgical service cannot be deduced from anything there written. The Spirit is the Spirit of freedom, the Spirit of love, Who fulfils Himself in a thousand ways, but has always the one life. As the book of the Acts is read from that standpoint, we are greatly impressed with the fact that if we would make our appeal for anything that is .traditional, we cannot go to the book of the Acts of the Apostles for our confirmation.

But traditions came within the Christian Church; they grew in number; and had exactly the same intention, that of maintaining the strength and character of the life. Systematic expressions of the belief of the Christian Church, are but systematic expressions of belief, and are to be numbered among the traditions of the Christian Church; sincere, wonderful, but human interpretation only. When some man or number of men, some college; apostolic band, or council of the Church, gathered together and formulated into definite expression the doctrines of the Church, they were giving their traditions, and human interpretations. So also came in process of time certain definitely declared forms of Church polity, as men wrought out the things they believed concerning the true method of the government of the Church, in order to its fulfillment of life and service. Thus there grew up in process of time such forms of Church life as differed from each other by traditions. That most wonderful of all, the Book of Common Prayer, is one of the more modern illustrations of what I mean. It is a wonderful compilation! It is impossible for any man to join in a service where it is used without feeling that he is being brought into the true atmosphere of reverent worship; but it is a tradition, a set form of worship arranged by men.

Sometimes these traditions take other forms: uniformity of dress, modes of common speech; until the Church of God to-day is a mass of tradition, conflicting, contradictory, as great as were the traditions that had covered up the Hebrew religion in the time of Christ.

Here again the necessary distinction must be made between the revelation which is given to us, which is authoritative and final; and these traditions. The revelation is that of the Old Testament Scriptures interpreted by the New, and never apart from the New; and that of the New Testament Scriptures, in their revelation of Christ, and in their declaration of the principles of Christian service in the great writings of the Apostles and others. We must remember to distinguish between these, and traditions which are but human interpretations of them. Every creed of the Church, Athanasian, Nicene, or any other, is but an attempt to interpret the things of the Oracles of God; reverent attempts, made necessary in some hour of crisis, when for the crystallization of truth into the phrases and terms of the hour, men were making an attempt which had to be made; but after all, they were human interpretations, and nothing more.

Notice in the second place, what our Lord said to these men concerning the genesis, not of tradition, but of obedience to tradition: "Ye leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men." This is a most startling announcement. He declared in that statement that the movement which leads men into subjugation to tradition is one of departure from the commandment of God. Directly a precept made for an occasion becomes a binding tradition to be subsequently obeyed, it is evil. Directly a creed formulated for an hour is crystallized into that which is to dominate the thought of men for subsequent ages, it is a curse. Directly a form of worship, or a form of church organization made necessary by the exigency of an age, is stereotyped into something that is to arrest the mind and soul of men perpetually, it becomes an evil thing. Men only submit to such when they pass out of immediate relationship with God. The individual soul never submits to the partial human interpretation, if that soul is living in immediate fellowship with God. The corporate Church of God, living in fellowship with the living Head, knowing His truth and righteousness and prevailing power, will never suffer itself to be brought under the trammels of human teachers or the arrangements of human office-bearers. Ever and anon we have seen such a corporate Church of Jesus Christ, almost always to be spoiled within a decade by tradition. The first movement toward the mastery of the soul by tradition is the movement of that soul away from immediate, direct, first-hand fellowship with God.

All this line of thinking is illuminated strangely and wonderfully by the habit of Jesus. Follow Him along the way of His earthly ministry, from that strange and wonderful hour when hearing the voice of the Hebrew prophet, He emerged from the silent seclusion of Nazareth, and commenced the work of public teaching; and watch Him carefully. The whole truth may be summarized by declaring that Jesus violated these traditions systematically, intentionally, resolutely. Gather out the instances which reveal His attitude toward the Sabbath, and it will be found that the first cause of quarrel between Himself and the rulers was His violation of the tradition concerning the Sabbath.

Then observe that again and again, in spite of the objection which they raised, which was bitter with the bitterness of great anger and hatred, He resolutely set Himself to do the same thing, over and over again. He wrought His wonders of healing on the Sabbath, violating their traditions, and trampling them under His feet, shocking them with the irreligiousness, as it seemed to them-of His attitude toward the Sabbath.

I am not for a moment inferring that our Lord violated the Sabbath. He never did so; but He violated their false conceptions concerning it. He flung Himself persistently, in habit, word, deed, and attitude, against all those traditions that stood between the soul of the people and their God.

Let us come away once more from the immediate and the incidental, and see the application of this teaching. In the examples already taken, mark the continuity of religious principles. No man who is living in true fellowship with God will consent to be mastered mentally by any creed that ever yet has been

prepared for him. The proportion, in which a man knows the high life of fellowship with God, is the proportion in which he knows that no creed his brother may write for him, no creed he may write for himself, can be final. No man or company of men, no Church living in true fellowship with God, will consent that its polity be stereotyped, or will confuse form with power, or life with the method of its expression. I have sometimes said, and shocked some of my friends by saying it, that I could hold a brief for every known form of Church polity on the basis of the New Testament. I could argue at length, if not eloquently, for Baptists. I could do the same for Presbyterianism, for Episcopalianism, and of course for Congregationalism. And I never forget that my argument would be based upon this fact, that life is more than a form of expression. Life may change its form of expression under different circumstances, with the coming of different needs. Consequently I can never quarrel with my brethren who are not following my conviction so far as Church polity is concerned. But I must never allow myself to be mastered by any polity when it interferes with my relation to life in the Lord Jesus Christ. Depend upon it; the souls who are enslaved by some form of ecclesiastical polity are weak and anaemic. The soul of man has immediate, first-hand fellowship with God. I hold that to be peculiarly true of any order of service that ever yet has been arranged for the worship of the saints, of any uniformity of dress, or manner of speech that has been adopted by the saints.

This teaching of Christ flings itself with force against every habit of excommunication on the basis of human creeds. It makes its undying protest against the habit of isolation on ecclesiastical grounds. It denies the possibility of stereotyped orders of service, so that there is no room for the movement of the life of God. It smiles with patience on all peculiarities of dress and modes of speech that are supposed to be symbols of sanctity, and of relationship to Christ. And the smile is not satirical, it is sympathetic.

Further, in this word of Jesus spoken long ago, there is a deeper note. He revealed here not only the genesis of obedience to tradition as being that of departure from God; but He revealed in the most startling way the effects of obedience to tradition. All we have already said needs qualification by way of explanation. His violation was not for the sake of violation. He only violated the tradition because it violated the law which it was intended to honour.

As we come to the remainder of this story, we hear the things He said as they reveal the real reason of His satire, His anger, His ruthless violating of all human traditions. He made it perfectly clear first of all that the tradition of man misses its own aim. Men are still defiled, wash they never so often. The inner life is never reached by external ceremony. External observance is only valuable as an expression of an inner life, and the expression of the inner life cannot be stereotyped. Consequently if the tradition be made, that there must be ceremonial ablution before men eat a meal, what is the value of it? Unless the ablution be an outward physical sign of inward spiritual cleansing, it is worthless. When the washing of baptism is the outward and physical sign of the inward and invisible grace, then it is useful and in its proper place. But when a man shall imagine that the ablution, the washing of baptism makes him a child of God, an inheritor of the Kingdom of heaven, he is mastered by a tradition that is blighting him, and robbing him of the faith he desires to realize, and misses his aim.

More than that, it stultifies its own purpose. The law of God, which tradition was intended to interpret and maintain, is insulted by it. Here again is an illustration with which we are very familiar, and yet how much light it throws upon the time in which Jesus lived, and then upon our own times. Their tradition was that a man might escape responsibility for father or mother by declaring that that which he could give to help them, was Corban, dedicated, given to God. Look at the picture Christ presents. A man who had a responsibility in material things, for a father and a mother, escaped his responsibility by declaring that that

which might have helped them was dedicate to the Temple. Oh! the anger, the scorn of Jesus! He says, "Full well do ye reject the commandment of God that ye may keep your tradition." The deepest thing any human life knows of a man's relationship to God-his duty to father and mother-is to be violated in the interests of his duty to God; and this is what tradition does! Thus Jesus declared that we are brutalized by tradition. Men mastered by tradition become the slaves of these human interpretations, and the very springs of compassion are dried up, and all the finest parts of the nature are destroyed. Thus religion is destroyed, when men are mastered by traditions.

These things persist. However excellent the intention of tradition, however valuable the precept in the hour when it was formulated for a local circumstance or condition; if that tradition take the place of the law of God; if that opinion of the past interfere between the soul and its immediate contact with God; if that expression of truth, or order of Church government, or method of worship coming from the past, exclude the soul from immediate fellowship with God, make impossible that hearing of the soul that catches the wind that bloweth where it listeth, destroy that freedom of life that only comes where the soul has direct access to God; then the tradition blights and blasts, however good its first intention may have been.

So finally, looking at the whole scene of the past, again being arrested by the earnestness of Christ here, by the directness of His word and the almost fierce invective of it, and the satire of it; let us remind ourselves that Christ's conception of religion as that of the direct obedience of the soul to the direct law of God, is the only one which can ensure to the soul its full realization of its own life. It is only in proportion as we individually find our way into that relationship which our Lord came to make possible as Saviour, and for evermore interpret through the Spirit, that life can be fulfilled.

This conception of life is at once difficult and easy. It is difficult. It seems to us so much simpler to live by rule than by principle, so much easier to find human sanction than to discover the will of God, so much easier to take an order from priest, or pope, or council, than to discover the will of God. There are moments of stress and strain when almost every man, while not likely to become a Romanist, wishes he could persuade himself to be one! If we only could make ourselves believe that the word spoken to us by another were the infallible word! But we cannot! It is against that pernicious tendency that Christ flung Himself. We must deal with God directly, immediately. The moment we admit any kind of tradition, or the exercise of authority that is based upon tradition, to come between the soul and God, we are impoverishing the soul, rendering it anaemic, weak, and sickly. This conception of life is difficult.

But it is also easy, because when once the soul dare break through the trammels, and become utterly careless of human opinion, and walk with God, it finds a path of reason, a path of power, a path of joy. I repeat, when once a soul dare break through the trammels. That is the point of difficulty. We are so much in the power of tradition that there are some who dare not stay away from a service because people might imagine they were irreligious! I believe there are a great many services most regularly held, that Jesus Christ would never attend! What we need to-day, if I know the temper of my own time, and the spirit of my own age, more than anything else is a return to that fine independence of soul which is created by loyalty to the Saviour and King, that brings men and women back to God, bursting the bonds and trammels of tradition.

In the moment of the soul's yielding to Him, will come the great hour in which the world will see the Kingdom of God, and the glory of its King. Let us become freemen by becoming His bond-slaves. Let us know the destruction of every yoke of bondage, by wearing the one yoke that He places upon us. Let us practice our bondage, and so realize our freedom.

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