

Matthew 15:1–20
Wed. of Oculi
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
March 6, 2024

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

There's nothing wrong with the traditions of men, so long as those traditions do not replace the traditions and commandments of God. In fact, the traditions of men are not only to be tolerated, they are to be praised, especially when they serve the things of God. Just think of all the traditions of men observed in your life: Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July, the superbowl, eating corned beef and cabbage on St. Patrick's day, family devotions, trick-or-treating, singing happy birthday. The traditions of men we share as families and nations serve to bring us closer together with our ancestors and with one another.

And think of all the man made traditions we have in the Church. Our rich musical heritage, the order of readings, vestments, standing, kneeling, folding our hands to pray, celebrating Christmas, Easter, and so many other festivals. The season of Lent, soup suppers, vespers. The traditions of men in the church serve to unite us with those who have gone before us in the faith and with one another, and more importantly, the traditions of men give us structure and opportunity to focus on the traditions and commandments of God.

A tradition is anything that is passed down. That's the literal meaning of the word. Anything passed down to us is a tradition. And to uphold the traditions of men in a sense upholds the fourth commandment: Honor your father and your mother. To honor the traditions passed on to us is to honor those who have gone before us in the faith. To discard all the good things passed down to us is to neglect the wisdom of our elders.

And then there are the traditions of God, the things passed down to us that come directly from God. This includes the Word and the Sacraments. God's Word is our great heritage and shall be ours forever. God's Word is passed down to us from generation to generation. It's "traditioned." We received it from the generations before us and we pass it on to the generations coming after us in an unbroken chain throughout history. God's Word is read, studied, meditated upon, prayed, translated, and applied in each generation. There's no greater purpose in your life than learning God's Word of Law and Gospel and passing that Word on to those who come after you. This includes allocating time and resources towards ways in which God's Word can be inculcated in the lives of our people.

The Sacraments are rooted in the Word of God and like the Word of God are also passed along from age to age. The Sacraments, too, are traditions of God, handed over to the saints. In 1 Corinthians 11:23, the Apostle Paul says: "I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you," and then he goes into the words of institution of the Lord's Supper. In the Latin text the word used to translate the Greek "hand over" is "tradition," Paul says: "what I received from the Lord I also tradition, or hand over, to you." The Word and the Sacraments are the traditions of God passed along to us and through us to the coming generations. Tradition is a good thing . . . when used in the right way.

Then we come to our Gospel text for this evening. The Pharisees and scribes asked Jesus: "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." Yes, even washing up before supper is a tradition of men. You might even argue it's a good tradition. The washing here, though, is a ritual washing, not necessarily a washing to remove dirt and germs. You could understand how helpful a practice it might be. To ritually wash before eating could be a reminder to not let anything impure enter your body or soul. Don't get

your hands dirty by soiling them with sin. Ritual washing could serve as a reminder of baptism. Everytime you wash your hands, you can be reminded of how the LORD washes you in a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Ritual washing of hands before eating is a wonderful commandment of men that can serve as a reminder of so much God is doing for us. So why don't Jesus and His disciples wash their hands before they eat? Well, maybe with traveling so much they don't have the right kind of basin for it. Or there's not enough water for washing hands and drinking. Or there's not time to ritually wash because Jesus and company need to teach and then keep moving. Or because Jesus has his mind set on much more important lessons. Or Jesus wants to use the opportunity to call out the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. For whatever reason, Jesus and His disciples don't follow this tradition of men. There are many reasons you might have to forego a beloved tradition. When a pastor communes shut-ins, he doesn't wear full eucharistic vestments, no matter how helpful a tradition they are. If you're traveling in Europe on the Fourth of July, it's hard to have your traditional Independence Day bar-b-que. When we meet for vespers in a home rather than in church, our traditions change a bit and become less formal. A tradition is helpful, but can also be changed or cast away depending on circumstances.

The traditions of men are flexible, but the traditions of God, otherwise called the commandments of God, are not flexible, not even a bit. And sometimes, we are called upon to obey God rather than men, to sacrifice man made traditions for the traditions of God. Jesus rebukes the scribes and Pharisees for doing the opposite. Jesus answered them: "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your traditions? Jesus takes us back again to the 4th commandment: Honor your father and your mother. This commandment of God includes providing for aging parents. But some wanted to take that time or money and give it to the

church instead of helping their parents. It's great to give to the things of God, but God commands us to honor our parents. To neglect what God commands for what we imagine to be more holy is called sin. The scribes and Pharisees placed their own man made traditions over the commandments of God, exactly as God spoke through the prophet Isaiah said: "in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

Next, Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter. Fallen man only looks at the outside, but God looks at the heart. Fallen man thinks much of a whitewashed tomb, but God sees the rot and decay inside. And on the other hand, fallen man sees weakness and frailty on the outside and assumes the same within, not understanding that God changes hearts and only then does outward behavior follow. Jesus says: "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." That's because "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone." As Jeremiah says: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9). We are sinful because our hearts are sinful. Sin affects every aspect of who we are. And the wickedness of the heart overflows in wicked words and deeds.

The traditions of men are fine and even helpful for communicating God's Word. But if the traditions of men simply serve to cover up a wicked, sinful heart, then these traditions need reevaluation. Like everything, all traditions of men need to be tested in light of the commandments of God, in light of the entirety of God's Word. It is God's Word that has the power to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12). It is the Word of God, passed on from generation to generation, that exposes us to the judgment of God. Yet it is also

the Word of God by which our LORD gives us new hearts. He takes our cold, stony hearts and makes them into hearts of flesh. He forgives our sins for the sake of Jesus Christ and transforms our hearts, giving us new and godly thoughts and desires that then overflow into a life of thanksgiving and praise. All of our man made traditions in the church are to support and raise up the Word of God that it might have free course and work in the lives of our people. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Magnificat.