

Scripture: Matthew 15:1-9.

Text: "Why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" --Matthew 15:3.

Sermon Topic: For the Sake of Tradition.

Proposition: For the sake of tradition (i.e.--to gain social approval) we tend to conform to many customs and practices which are harmful to people and (therefore) sinful before God; but as Christians we should strive to do what is best for people, as the highest active expression of Christianity possible in this life.

Dates written: February 3-6, 1970.

Dates and places used:

Feb 8, 1970 - Ocala, Fla.

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Feb 6, 1970 - Cambridge, Mass.

Introduction:

1. At the conclusion of a concert two ushers were applauding harder than anybody else. The audience was impressed with the fact that they were true music lovers, and then one usher suddenly stopped applauding.

The other turned to him and said in a stage whisper, "Keep clapping, you idiot! One more encore and we're on overtime."

(from Good Reading for 12/69 as in Quote for 1-1-70)

2. People often appear to be doing something for one reason when actually they are doing it for another, as these ushers actually were not the great lovers of music which at first they were thought to be. Sometimes a person may even fool himself, so that in honesty he will give as his reason for an action one cause, but later come to realize that he was actually moved by another, stronger, perhaps-hidden reason.

3. In the Scripture that we read today Jesus was asked a question by some of the learned religious people of his day, the scribes and pharisees, and in his answer he pointed out to

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3. In the Scripture that we read today Jesus was asked a question by some of the learned religious people of his day, the scribes and pharisees, and in his answer he pointed out to

them that they actually were not quite as truly-religious and pious as they seemed to be; that while thinking of themselves as correct in religious detail, they actually were law breakers and irreligious people of a very bad sort. He was telling them that their motives for action were not really what they said they were.

4. Since we often are engaged in the same mannerisms, the same wrongdoing, in essence at least, it is well that we try to find the message of our Lord Jesus by making

I. A synopsis of the Scripture passage that we read.

1. A synopsis is, by definition, a general view of a situation; or a condensed version of a longer statement.

2. One example of a condensed version of a longer process might be the statement a beautiful blonde was overheard making to a friend. She said, "I used to be an intellectual -- until I wised up."

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That statement certainly told a lot about both the girl and the public with which she mingled! In a few words.

3. We don't know just where Jesus was when this incident happened. It is related as immediately following an incident at Genessaret in which those who touched the fringe of his garment were healed from their illnesses; so it may have happened there. The Scripture says that the scribes and pharisees, learned religious leaders of Israel, came from Jerusalem to Jesus. The first thing they did was to ask him a question, "Why do your disciples transgress (break) the tradition (law or rule) of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." Jewish law had been developed by earlier Pharisees to include many minute religious requirements, many small ceremonies and acts, which were considered necessary to the worship of God. This one to which these leaders referred, the washing of hands before eating, sounds like an ordinary sanitation preventive measure which we will use. It is good sense to wash your hands before eating, to remove

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grime and germs so that they **do** not get on the food as it is handed into your mouth. But the ~~s~~cribes and Pharisees did not know about germs. The ruling was an adoption for the average God-fearing layman of a form of priestly showmanship. The priests would take a bowl of water, usually an elaborate bowl of gold or other precious substance, and with the water in it ceremoniously, and so all could see, apply it to their wrists and hands, usually the back of the hands, ~~so~~ it really wasn't a cleansing ceremony. That was ~~then~~ always done before they would ~~eat~~ publicly eat the food that had been sacrificed on the altar, often eating it in front of lots of hungry people. Later, by the time of Jesus, they insisted that everyone use this particular form of washing before he ate - as a sign of his devotion to God. It really didn't have much actual usage or value.

4. Jesus lived in this type of environment, and he respected most of the laws, and kept them. However, if you care to check it out you will see that he seemed to set a higher

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value on defending and being just to those close to him. So when the disciples were attacked by the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus defended them by showing ^{THE JEWISH LEADERS} ~~THEM~~ how THEY broke the laws about which they talked. He referred to one of the oldest and most-respected of the laws, the commandment that says "honor thy father and thy mother that their days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." He told them that they were not honoring or supporting their needy parents, but taking what should have been spent or used for them and giving it to "God," (to the temple, to "religious" projects), and then saying to their parents, "What you would have gained from me is given to God." In other words, these leaders who accused his disciples of breaking a minute point of religious practice were themselves breaking a **major** religious law, a law of God, in order to keep a lesser (though not unimportant) commandment. They were trying to keep manmade tradition and custom, and were ignoring God's law to do so.

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the very source that the scribes and Pharisees used to justify their actions and accusations, their Scripture:

"This people honors me with their lips,
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in vain do they worship me,
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(v. 8-9)

6. Jesus used the word "tradition" twice in this Scripture to refer to these "doctrines of men." Once, he asked, "Why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your traditions?" Again, he said, "for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God."

I. We of today tend to pay too much attention, too, to "the traditions (or customs) of men", thereby ignoring God's law and hurting other people.

1. People of Biblical faith, whether ^{believing} from the Old or New Testaments, believe that fidelity in marriage is a demand of God's law, and that the

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practice of pre-marital sexual indulgence is morally wrong and harmful, both to those who practice it and to society. We think that "God's law", if you will, demands chastity before marriage and fidelity after marriage.

2. Yet, according to "the traditions of men", if you can get pleasure of a sexual nature with no harm to any but the mutually-consenting persons involved, that's all right. Such is far from the case actually. For one thing, you can never be sure that you are not harming some innocent but very concerned person.

3. One incident from the news of our national capitol not long ago illustrates what we're talking about. In some Washington traffic surveys cars were photographed, their license numbers were traced, and questionnaires were sent to the owner's homes. One was sent to a wife whose husband ~~had~~ been driving her car one day, and the guy had a hard time explaining to her how he ~~had~~ had come to be in the wrong traffic jam in the wrong part of town.

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4. Or, consider the matter of making a profit in business. The "traditions of men" today seem to stress making the most you can out of anyone and any circumstance. Christian ethic, the law of God, applied to business, would seem to insist that honest goods or service be given for a reasonable profit, enabling the merchant or worker to live comfortably, but not charging far beyond what his product is worth, ~~not~~ charging all the traffic will bear. We think that the spiraling forces of inflation are based to quite an extent on greed, on people not thinking about the welfare of those they serve, on the attitude of getting all you can while the getting is good. Eventually, we earnestly think, such conduct will backfire to the disadvantage of the one who without conscience overcharges.

5. Another story, humorous as we hope, illustrates that. It is about a gorilla who walked into the door of a hamburger joint. The guy behind the counter ran into the back room when he saw the ape, "There's a live gorilla out there," he stammered

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to his boss. "He just walked in and ordered a hamburger."

"Serve him," said the boss. "Wanda just give him \$1 change from that \$10 bill he's got in his hand."

The counterman went back out and did as he had been told. As the gorilla munched on the hamburger, the waiter said, "You know, we don't get too many gorillas in here."

To this the gorilla replied, "I'm not very surprised -- at \$9 a hamburger."

6. You can bet your boots that when people have a choice of services and goods, they'll remember the people who were fair and honest. The crooks, the greedy, hurt everyone --including themselves.

7. We could use other "horrible examples" to illustrate that we of today are too prone to adapt to the standards of the world around us, instead of bravely and sometimes sacrificially sticking to our Christian standards. We think that a good case still can be made that

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III. as Christians, we should strive to do what is best for people, as the highest active expression of Christianity available to us.

1. There is a story about the architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, who had the courage to institute what were startling new forms of building. He introduced some ideas which are often copied, and which ~~have~~ started other architects off in dramatic new concepts. Once during a trial, Frank Lloyd Wright was called to the witness stand and sworn in under oath. The county attorney asked, "Your name?" "Frank Lloyd Wright." "Your occupation?" asked the attorney. Wright then drew himself up so that his long white hair and his elegant 19th century clothing made him quite a striking figure, and said, "I am the world's greatest living architect." Later, appalled at such seeming immodesty, a friend asked, "How could you ever say such a thing?" "I had to," Wright answered. "You see, I was under oath."
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2. If you've seen some of Frank Lloyd Wright's work, such as his contributions to the Florida Southern campus at Lakeland, you may or may not agree with him as to how great he was. But the point we would make here is that he had the courage to express his ideas in architecture, in spite of the fact that they were quite different, and in so doing he did contribute to the aesthetic aspects of many localities. You may not like what he did, but many people do.

3. Similarly, as Christians we should have the courage to put into practice that which our faith makes us believe. If we take seriously Christ's commandments to love other people second only to our love for God, then we're going to live quite different lives than we will if we simply try to follow "the traditions of men" ~~and~~ by making the most money and having the greatest pleasures for ourselves.

4. After all, ~~in~~ what other ways do you have in which to do God's work on earth, than through and for other people? Sure, you can pray

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and worship publicly and privately, and should. You can contribute to the program~~x~~ and building budgets of churches and other places of praise and worship, and should. But to do something ~~whenever possible~~ for somebody else whenever possible takes ~~some~~ sacrifice of pleasures, ~~and~~ money, and time which might well be used for ourselves. To go further and give time and money which are really needed for ourselves is getting into the realm of true sacrifice, and to begin to become Christlike.

5. Such giving of time, money and abilities ~~might~~ in this day in which we live~~x~~ might mean working for a lower wage because the job being done is more worthy than the higher-paying one. It might mean sticking with your marriage when people you know are getting divorced for much lesser cause than you think you have. It might mean standing up for racial equality when the neighbors around you or those who ~~employ~~ you (like you do me) are firmly against much mixing. It might mean a willingness to give up most of our automobiles in order to lower air pollution and highway congestion.

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Conclusion:

1. "Why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" Jesus asked the scribes and Pharisees. If he were on earth in the flesh today, maybe he would ask me and more-highly placed church professionals the same thing. Maybe he would ask you key laymen in our church!

2. If we were honest, we would have to admit that we do a great deal of our activity because it is "traditional," expected of us, the custom, what we've always known. We would have to confess that we are quite often very uncomfortable with or fearful of the unusual and the unknown. We know that we are too thoroughly intimidated by and indoctrinated with the liking of things as they are, because things as they are put us in pretty good positions, really.

3. As Christians, we believe that tradition may have some values, but that any part of it which hurts people should be discarded. We believe this because his breaking

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with many traditions about 1940 years ago got Jesus into ~~the~~ trouble, and he is the example for the man of Christian faith. We remember, however, that the trouble he got into ended up with him resurrected and victorious.

4. Let us, then, commit ourselves to break with traditions and customs which are harmful to people, to any people. Let us as Christians strive to do what is best for people, all people of all places and races. ~~For~~ When you get right down to it, here on earth the only possible way you have to serve God is through other people. As Christians, then, we should strive to do what is best for people, for this is the highest active expression of Christianity that is possible in this life.

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