

Psalm 45:7-8 Your throne, O God, endures for ever and ever, a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of your kingdom; you love righteousness and hate iniquity. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness... (39)

Introduction

One of the most difficult things for me to navigate as a teacher is the tendency for students to parrot. When I was a teacher at the high school levels, I would walk around my circle of students and say, "I want to know what **you** think; I don't need 20 more Rev. Larkins...God knows there's one too many." To protect the space for students toward intellectual liberty, I implemented a contract grading system. Making grades dependent on the completion of specific tasks (with flexibility to student need) rather than on memorization and recitation. While I had great success with this grading approach, one thing congested the air preventing authentic and personal wrestling with thought: the deeply ingrained training of conformity for fear of punishment. For the life of me, there were students who just froze when given the liberty to speak their mind, so they would tell me what they thought I wanted to hear.

While I could wax not-so-eloquently about the state of school systems and how they contribute to the conformity of human beings to the status-quo rather than bolstering and building curiosity and creativity, the thing that I want to stress here is that this conformity for fear of punishment moved from chair and desk into pew and table. When I lead chapel as a chaplain at the high school, I'd listen to student voices recite in unison creeds, prayers, and responses. But there was very little life in it. They said the words because they had to, because they were told they must, because they were afraid of some form of punishment if they didn't. For one reason or another, their hearts were far from those words.

At some point during each semester, I'd exhort them: "Don't say the words if you really don't want to; there's nothing magic in them, you aren't saved through them but through faith. You have my permission to opt out." I desired for them to have robust and vigorous relationships with God, the very God who moved heaven and earth to be as close to them as they are to themselves and maybe even closer. I wanted them to embody the liberation that comes with the groundwork of justification with God by faith in Christ alone by the power of the Holy Spirit. I wanted them to *want* to say those words, those prayers, those responses and not because they were so tied to fear and traditionalism. I wanted them to be ὁ λαός of God bursting forth from the heart, not an illusion built upon words slipping from lips.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

And then the pharisees and the scribes questioned him, "Why are your disciples not walking according to the tradition of the elders, but are eating food with unclean hands?" And [Jesus] said to them, "Isaiah prophesied well concerning you pretenders, as it is written, 'This people honors me with lips, but their heart are held far back from me; and they worship me to no purpose while teaching the

teaching of religious precepts of humanity.’ While releasing the command of God you hold fast to the tradition of humanity handed down.” (Mk 7:5-8)¹

So, Jesus’s disciples are *caught* eating with dirty hands by a group of pharisee-scribes coming from Jerusalem (vv. 1-2).² As the disciples sit and eat, this group of religious authorities from Jerusalem confronts Jesus about this brash and flagrant infraction. Why care so much? Well, the issue at stake here for this group of religious authorities is that Jewish people are supposed to wash their hands (and other items (vv. 3-4)³) diligently prior to using them to make sure they are ritually clean (the issue of hygiene is less in view here).⁴ What’s interesting is there’s only a reference in the First Testament (Ex. 30:18-21; 40:30-32) to diligently washing hands for the sake of purity: *priests* are supposed to wash their hands prior to the sacrifice.⁵

The command to wash hands—given to the priests—morphed into a human tradition passed down from the religious authorities to the people, and it became normative.⁶ This is what Jesus takes issue with, and rightly so. The emphasis on obedience to the traditions handed down by humanity interferes with heart-felt devotion to God. The people, who are merely trying to survive day in and day out, are burdened with superfluous tasks and deeds baptized in the name of God. The work of serving the Lord and offering authentic devotion birthed from the heart gives way to the toil of upholding human made demands for fear of being punished or

¹ Translation mine unless otherwise noted

² RT France *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* TIGTC Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002. 280. “Matthew’s phrase ἀπὸ Ἱεροσολύμων Φαρισαῖοι καὶ γραμματεῖς suggests a single group coming from Jerusalem to Galilee. Mark’s wording, however, divides the group into the (presumably local) Φαρισαῖοι and τινες τῶν γραμματέων ἐλθόντες ἀπὸ Ἱεροσολύμων. Judging from the area of their concern these scribes from Jerusalem were themselves also Pharisees, and no distinction between the two groups is discernible in the pericope...The fact that in both instances they are described as having arrived...from Jerusalem probably indicates that they have come specially to investigate and/or to dispute with Jesus.”

³ France *Mark* 281. “Mark’s explanatory account of Jewish rituals of purity is apparently directed to Gentile readers of the gospel. It is a broad-brush, unsophisticated account, which conveys a general sense of meticulous concern to avoid defilement rather than a nuanced presentation of the purity laws- of the OT and of tradition.”

⁴ France *Mark* 280. “As in 2:18,23-24, it is the behaviour of Jesus’ disciples rather than his actions which provides the point of dispute...The issue this time (as in 2:18) is not one of obedience to the OT laws, but of rules subsequently developed in Pharisaic circles. While no doubt it could normally be expected that hands would be washed before a meal for hygienic reasons (since food was often taken from a common dish), the only hand washing required in the OT for purposes of ritual purity is that of priests before offering sacrifice (Ex. 30:18-21; 40:30-32). 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.”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ France *Mark* 283. τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν περσβυτέρων “The term is not specific, and refers merely to ‘received wisdom’, and that wisdom may not have been of very long standing, nor have been shared by all groups within Judaism at that time. But for the scribes, as for religious groups generally, there is an assumption that what has once been established by usage normative; for them this practice is now self-evidently right. Jesus’ response will therefore focus on this more fundamental issue of the relative authority of tradition as such as a guide to the will of God, rather than on the provenance of the particular tradition in question.”

ostracized. So, in defense of the beleaguered people, Jesus creatively quotes Isaiah⁷ to respond to the pharisee-scribes from Jerusalem:

“This people honors me with lips, but their heart is held far back from me; and they worship me to no purpose while teaching the teaching of religious precepts of humanity.”

And concludes with the accusation that they have allowed the traditions of humanity to usurp the command of God (v.8).

Two things I want to highlight here in the profundity of Jesus’s reply. There’s a clear accusation against the religious authorities: they’ve taught and handed down these traditions of humanity and demonstrate they are not holding to the commands of God.⁸ The religious authorities are taking the purity of the people into their own hands thus they are commandeering the worship of the people to reflect human traditions handed down (the externals).⁹ The more they do this, the further they get from being of the things of God.¹⁰ Their worship of God is of no purpose and in vain. This is their own doing.

The other thing I want to highlight is this: while Jesus is casting divine accusation at the religious authorities for their preference for human tradition over and against divine command, he’s also exposing the people. As the religious authorities peddle these traditions of humanity handed down and baptize them as God’s decree, the people (ὁ λαός) are also far from being of the things of God and are consumed by the things of humanity. They, too, worship in vain and to no purpose. But this is not of their own doing.

⁷ France *Mark* 284. “The Introductory formula (containing the only use in Mark of the ‘Matthean’ term ὑποκριτής) assumes that Isaiah’s words, which originally described the superficial religious devotion of his eighth-century contemporaries than predicting a future situation, can be directly applied to, indeed were written about, ὑμεῖς. This ‘contemporising’ 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 fulfilment, even though in themselves they had no predictive force.”

⁸ France *Mark* 284. “The specific statement that the worship described is ‘vain’ undoubtedly sharpens the application, and the inclusion of διδάσκοντες fits well with the specific application of the charge to scribes rather than to the people in general, but the text even in its Hebrew form describes a worship which is based on externals and is of purely human origin, which is just the point which Jesus goes on to make about the scribal traditions, whereas the specifically LXX point that their worship is ‘in vain’ is nowhere drawn into Jesus’ comments.”

⁹ France *Mark* 284-5. “The contrast in Isaiah between lips (words) and heart is not taken up as a regular form of expression in the gospels, but 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...”

¹⁰ France *Mark* 285. “The fundamental contrast is the last—true religion is focused on God, not a merely human activity. What comes from God has the authoritative character of ἐντολή, which requires obedience; what comes from human authority is merely παράδοσις, which may or may not be of value in itself, but cannot have the same mandatory character. Yet they have held fast to the latter, while allowing the former to go by default. ἀφίμυ perhaps does not yet denote deliberate rejection, but rather a wrong sense of priorities, resuming in de facto neglect of God’s law...”

Conclusion

I was never upset with my beloved students for their fear of performing rightly if vacantly; they were taught to fear things created by human minds and hands. I was upset with their teachers, the ones who instilled the fear. As Jesus says, what comes out of our mouths is very important.

When we become so consumed with this thing and that thing, with how things should be done and should not be done, with wood and stone, with our own purity and obedience in external things, we lose the marvel and wonder of the divine presence in the encounter with God in the event of faith. All these material and external things surrounding us are here to serve us and our worship; we are *not* to serve it. When we elevate the material and external things to the realm of the divine, we will—along with the pharisee-scribes—release the word of God and hold fast to the traditions handed down by humanity. When the emphasis falls on us serving the material and external things; we become burdened with toil and our worship is in vain and to no purpose because we are worshipping ourselves.

Even worse than losing ourselves in wrong priorities, we will guide others into this dis-order. As a priest and future doctor of the church, the weight is rightly on me to speak well. Not in terms of doctrine and dogma (human made), not in creeds and prayers (again, human made), but in the Word made flesh, the incarnate word of God, the Christ crucified and raised. Those of us called out to lead from within must remain humbled at the foot of the cross and consumed in the glory of divine activity of life out of death in the resurrection of Jesus. It is not about me bringing you into what makes sense to me, but into what makes sense to God: divine love, divine peace, divine justice for you and for others. In other words, what comes out of my mouth is very important and reveals where my roots are, where my focus is, and to whom my heart belongs (vv.14-15).

Beloved, we have been liberated to love the world not in the purity of our religiosity which actually drives people away, but in the imperfection of our humanity which will call people in. It's not about getting the external and material right in these walls at this table in these linens; rather, it's about living through the imperfection of our belovedness into the world making the material and external better for those fighting to survive for truly this is divine love, divine peace, and divine justice in action. Let us love as we've been loved.