

Commandments of God and Traditions of Men

From our Gospel today, Mark 7:1-13, it almost seems as though the Pharisees and the scribes, the theologians of Jesus' day, had a point in criticising Him. At first glance, it seems as though Jesus was ignoring the ceremonial laws God had given by not rebuking His disciples for eating with unwashed hands. This was not so. Then what was the situation?

When God created man and woman, He placed His moral law into their hearts so that they might conduct their lives as obedient children of God. Unfortunately they sinned, and death is the wages of sin. The only solution was the one God provided. He promised the Saviour, who would pay for their sins and fully keep the law in their place. In order that this promise would be fulfilled, God chose the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the nation from which the Saviour would be born. To make sure that it would remain separate from all other nations, God repeated His will in the Ten Commandments and then gave the nation numerous ceremonial laws that would set it apart from the other nations.

The Israelites, as the years passed, ignored God's Word more and more. Many forgot the promise and instead zeroed in on the commandments of God as the way to heaven. Still, there were always those who clung to the promise and recognised the commandments as a way to safeguard the existence of the gospel promise. Later, during the fourth and third centuries before the birth of Christ, there were those who considered the moral law and the ceremonial laws God had given them as insufficient. So they augmented them and finally came up with 613 rules regulating the Israelites' lives down to the smallest details. The gospel promise was ignored, and salvation became something to be earned by one's own righteousness, although there were still those, as we learn from Anna the prophetess, who after Jesus was presented in the temple "spoke about the Child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem," (Luke 2:38).

Among these ceremonial regulations were the ones Mark mentions in our Gospel reading today. Mark went into detail because his first readers were Gentiles, unacquainted with many of these matters. What Jesus (and Mark, the writer of this gospel) was concerned about was that these expansions of the Old Testament ceremonial laws did not have God's backing. In fact, at times they abrogated God's own moral law.

God's moral law still stands. We know, of course, that it cannot save us. Only Christ and His gospel can do that. The Old Testament ceremonial laws, however, no longer apply today. The Father Himself indicated that when at the death of Christ on Calvary, He caused the curtain in the temple to be "*torn in two from top to bottom*" (15:38), thus giving free access to God. That's why Paul in Colossians 2:17 says that the ceremonial laws "*are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*" Philippians 3:3 assures New Testament believers: "*It is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.*"

The Pharisees and teachers of the law mentioned in this portion of Mark did put their confidence in the flesh. What is more, they did so in a way that made them hypocrites and demolishers of God's own Word. They reduced the ceremonial commands of the Scripture and their own traditions to outward acts they could perform without actually involving the heart. That's why Jesus applied the words of Isaiah 29:13 to them: "*This people honours Me with its lips, but its hearts are far from Me. They worship Me in vain, since what they teach as doctrines are the commandments of men.*" What a tragic loss when we remember that God's Old Testament ceremonial laws were meant to prepare the way for Christ!

What's worse is that their teachings also at times undermined the moral law. Christ pointed out how they violated the Fourth Commandment. They permitted children to refuse help to needy parents by simply calling what they needed for help "Corban," that is, a gift

dedicated to God or promised to the temple. Jesus, in this connection, told them exactly what they did: "*You make the Word of God of no effect.*"

The Judaism of Jesus' day, as well as the Judaism of our own day (though we understand it has modified some of the extreme forms of Corban), needed these penetrating words of Jesus. The disciples later told Jesus, "*Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?*" (Matthew 15:12). Let's hope that for at least some of them that was the first step in the right direction.

What Jesus told these Pharisees and teachers of the law He also shared with the people and with His disciples. This was necessary, since all of them had been brought up to honour and respect the Pharisees and teachers of the law but were not aware of how their teaching had undermined the main thrust of the Old Testament - the promise of the coming Saviour and salvation only through Him. Because of this, we too, also need these words of Christ.