

Sermon: St. Mark 7:5-16

7-29-12 (8th Sunday After Trinity), Bethany-Princeton MN

FALSE DOCTRINE PRODUCES EMPTY WORSHIP

Prayer: Almighty Father, who by Your Son Jesus Christ taught us to beware of false prophets: Have mercy upon Your Church, we beseech You, to deliver it from all evil; and give us faithful pastors and teachers who shall truly fulfill Your command and preach nothing contrary to Your Holy Word; that we Your people, being instructed, nurtured and comforted by Your heavenly truth, may bring forth fruit to Your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*)

The Text, St. Mark 7:5-16. ⁵ Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him [Jesus], "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?" ⁶ He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: " *'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. ⁷ And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'* ⁸ For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men – the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do." ⁹ He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. ¹⁰ For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' ¹¹ But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban" –' (that is, a gift to God), ¹² then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, ¹³ making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do." ¹⁴ When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear Me, everyone, and understand: ¹⁵ There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. ¹⁶ If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!" Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

In our church, not just our congregation but the Lutheran church, we use the word *doctrine* a lot. Doctrine is important to us. It means *teaching*. We speak of "true doctrine" vs. "false doctrine," in which case it refers to the full teaching of God's Word, whether it is being taught in its truth and purity. Or we speak of

specific teachings, for instance the doctrine of justification or the doctrine of the ministry. We're used to seeing doctrine this way in black and white: in textbook form, in the catechism, or in individual "doctrinal statements."

Here in Jesus' words to the Pharisees and scribes He actually uses the word "**doctrines.**" But He also makes it clear that it isn't relegated to a textbook, nor does it simply belong to the realm of "stuff you learn." He says "**doctrines**" and "**worship**" in the same breath. This shows that worship is the primary form doctrine takes. He does so in negative terms, speaking to His familiar antagonists the Pharisees and scribes, when He repeats the words of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, and says they are true of the Pharisees' and scribes' relationship to God: "**In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.**" He says their worship is "vain," or empty, and it's because of doctrine.

We should look at the context in which Jesus said these words. The Pharisees and scribes accused Jesus of leading His disciples into sin by permitting them to eat food with unwashed hands. We think of this in terms of being sanitary, but for them this was a religious ritual. It was a question of being not physically but *ceremonially* clean, able to be in God's presence safely. These "washings" were required so often that they kept large jars on hand for such purification, like the water-pots present at the wedding in Cana. The method was important: The hands were lifted up to make the water run to the wrist, to ensure that the water polluted by the hand did not again run down the fingers; also, one hand was washed with the fist closed so the other hand wouldn't become unclean.

The important point that Jesus makes is that while they spoke of this as being "the law," it was not God's Law. It wasn't part of His revealed will, His written Word. It was "**the tradition of men,**" Jesus says. The issue isn't that such tradition itself is wrong, but it *was* wrong to let it be more important than God's Word. Jesus says they had made "**the word of God of no effect.**"

Jesus goes on to point out that they even had established another man-made law that gave people permission to ignore and disobey the 4th Commandment. They could say the word “**Corban,**” a binding legal vow which would tie up that money so it could *not* be used to help their parents. Once again, Jesus’ point is that they were making what God’s Word said secondary in importance.

Jesus is showing that doctrine doesn’t just sit there. It affects what you *do*.

The eating-with-unwashed-hands controversy, since the Jews made it part of the ceremonial law, affected how they worshipped God. They manufactured pretend sins, which drove them farther from God and furthermore made people self-righteous, so they didn’t deal with real sins that actually did come between them and God. Also, creating a vow that would block them from giving real help to aging parents is not just a false doctrine that sits there. It had real consequences for real people; it kept them from loving and honoring their mother or father.

So at this point Jesus turned to the crowd. Mark makes a special point of this. He says Jesus “**called all the multitude to Himself,**” began with “**Hear Me, everyone, and understand,**” and concluded, “**If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!**” Why did Jesus do this? Again, because false doctrine doesn’t just sit there. What the Pharisees and scribes taught led their hearers to *do* things: for example, to be obsessed with the outward keeping of the Law but ignore the most important part, how they stand before God; and to ignore their own parents’ needs.

Jesus’ concern – and the main reason He exposes false doctrine -- is the worship that people actually do, first how you worship God in your relationship with Him: what you believe, think and say to Him in your prayers and praises; and secondly how you worship Him in your life with others: fearing, loving and trusting in Him so that you actually honor your parents, help and befriend your neighbor, etc. Jesus doesn’t want His people to “**teach as doctrines the commandments of men**” because He doesn’t want them to “**worship Me in vain.**”

Many people don't suspect worship has anything to do with doctrine. They decide on a church based on whether people are nice, what activities are available for their kids, and as far as worship goes, they look for a style they're comfortable with, if it doesn't bore them, if the music is "fun," if the words are on a screen to make it easy, etc. Some have so-called "Kids' Church" that takes children out of the sanctuary and moves them to a place where they play games.

But here Jesus shows that worship is not a game. It matters what worship is filled with, and the very last question we should be asking is what we want, or what we feel or think. What matters in worship is what God wants our worship to be filled with, and He has not kept this a secret. He tells us in His written Word. Jesus says in John 4 that the true God must be worshipped "*in truth*," later in John's gospel He said, "*I Am the Truth*," and we hear of Jesus' death that "*he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true ... he is telling the truth, so that you may believe.*" And what is believing in Him? Worship.

This is what true worship must be filled with: the truth of God's Word. This is why you are not just baptized but also taught, from Sunday School on. It's why we have catechism class and adult Bible class. It's why we study the Bible, why we hear the Bible read in church and say the creed every Sunday, why we don't just sing "favorite hymns" or music that makes us feel good but (especially in the Lutheran church) we sing doctrinal hymns filled with correct doctrine drawn from God's Word, and don't just say the first thing on our minds when we pray but we use and reuse prayers that are carefully written to ask petitions in accordance with God's will. It's why the Lutheran Church is the *teaching* church not only in classes but in sermons and in the church service. Not to file this information away somewhere, but to worship Him "in truth!"

So you see what happens if there is any false doctrine: it makes worship "empty," not in the sense that there is *nothing* there – since even false worship is

filled with teaching, but teaching of the wrong kind. In this situation the worship is emptied of *Christ*, it is emptied of its true Substance with a capital "S," the true divine Essence, Himself, the one true God who wants to be your God, who makes Himself personally present for you to enjoy Him. That's what worship is.

True worship is filled with true doctrine, the Truth, that is, Christ Himself. It is not a list of rules and regulations, though it must include the correct teaching of the Law: the 10 Commandments showing you your sins, so that you know that you need a Savior, so that you will come to Him sorry for your sins. But it is filled especially with the correct teaching of the Gospel, the message of His forgiveness, so that you believe in His grace and mercy for you. Notice that this all comes from what is written down in the Bible. To love His Word is to love Him. In and through His Word He comes to you; that is the essence of true worship.

Notice that, while we often think of worship as something we do, and that doctrine is something we do through good teaching and attentive learning, neither one is primarily your work. You can never learn it all, retain it all, or worship perfectly. But that is why Christ comes to you in the means of grace.

This is why it's important that the one episode from Jesus' childhood in the Bible shows Him in the temple. Why do we see His learning in perfect humility, His perfect desire to be about His Father's business, to be in His house and gladly hear and learn His Word, and then His being subject to His parents and superiors and increasing in favor with God and men? It's so that when you fail to learn in humility, when you forget or fail to live out what you have been taught, when you are not gladly hearing and learning His Word, when you let His Word take second place, when your worship is too much about you and not enough about Jesus, you might know that what Jesus did perfectly counts for you as though you have done it, and God sees in you – for Jesus' sake – only a perfect adherence to His truth, and worship that cannot be improved.

In this way our worship is joined to the perfect worship of Him being done by angels, archangels and all the company of heaven. As His will is done there – where they know all things and worship Him not only with perfect music and the best hymns, but also with perfect joy, unselfishness, and contentment – His will is also done here on earth, in you, for the blood of Jesus purifies your worship and your prayers, and takes away all abusing of the truth and misuse of knowledge and reason. In Christ we do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth. With the help of His grace you do worship Him in spirit and in truth. With His help you will do this more and more, until He brings you where there is only room for the truth, the voice of praise is never silent, and true worship of Him is all you'll do and the only life you'll know forever and ever. Amen!