

The religious leaders of Jesus day watched him and his disciples with the eye of an eagle eye. The religious leaders are determined to discredit this teacher from Nazareth...everything he says and does...everything his disciples say and do...any and everything Jesus fails to do. Although the news cycle in first century Israel was not 24/7, as we read the Gospels it is clear that the rumors, accusations, and criticisms of Jesus were just about as persistent. We have an example of this in our Gospel lesson this morning.

A brief summary, prior to exposition and application: Jesus' disciples fail to ceremonially wash their hands before they ate; *'The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law'* observed this religious faux pax and identify this as a great opportunity to confront Jesus; the confrontation is stated in this way: *"Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating food with defiled hands?"*. [Mk. 7:5]

Jesus is, as is to be every disciple of every generation, adequately 'armed' or prepared to respond to the ever-available-critics in this world. To the *'teachers of the law'*, Jesus quotes and applies their own respected prophet Isaiah, saying: *'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."'* May we readily acknowledge that Jesus does not cower before his critics? There is no timidity in Jesus' response. There is no quest for political correctness demonstrated by Jesus. There is, we note, absolutely no apology offered for this criticized behavior of Jesus' disciples. Instead, Jesus quotes scripture and turns the criticism right back on the critics!

Jesus concludes, or summarizes, his immediate response to his critics in this way: *'You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.'* [7:8] Oh, how powerfully, painfully, and accurately this statement echoes down through the centuries and within the walls of countless churches and the hearts of countless Christians. The examples are 'legion' of congregations, church members, and denominations letting go of the truth in God's Word, substituting in the place of Scripture their own created traditions.

Against this tide of man-made traditions this very congregation took its stand back in 2010 and 2011, discerning that God could not and would not bless the altered, water-down teachings of our former denomination and that we could not [in good faith and conscience] simply go along silently and obediently! This congregation, and our denomination of The North American Lutheran Church, claims and proclaims that The Bible is the *'inspired Word of God, our authority and norm for all matters of faith and life.'* When the lure and lessons of this secular world contradict the truth of Scripture, we reject falsehood and hold fast to God's truth! I'm immediate to say, asking you to be quick to hear, we are not pretending to be perfect...we are striving, by God, to be faithful.

We read in our OT lesson this morning the admonition regarding God's Word: *'Follow them...do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God...'* [Deut. 4:2] Yet, by the years of Jesus' earthly ministry, the religious leaders had created some 613 commandments, only complicating the original 10 God graciously gave to Moses. We are not to dilute nor eliminate or add to God's Word. So what are we to do?

- 1- Observe them carefully
- 2- Be careful, and watch ourselves closely
- 3- Do not forget what we have seen with our own eyes
- 4- Do not let these firsthand experiences 'fade from your

heart as long as you live'    5- Teach God's Word to our children  
6- Teach God's word to their children after them

I like traditions, so long as they direct our attention to the God we serve. I am old-fashioned, so long as fashions-of-old help us to walk and serve faithfully with God. Yet, traditions can become 'well-rehearsed-bad-habits'...things we do, but no longer know why. Practices that are familiar, but don't actually enhance or feed our faith. I am aware that I am not...this congregation is not...immune to getting side-tracked, focusing upon our human desires and passed-on-practices, rather than God's direction. I/We make our share of mistakes, but, by God, we demonstrate a willingness to admit and confess this...when we get off track, asking God [like a GPS] to 're-calculate' our journey.

We all deal with and experience difficulties during our days. But, may our hardships never serve to distance us from the God who loves us and will never forsake us. It is in and through God that we are given a freedom the world cannot give, a peace this world is unable to offer. May we continue to focus upon the blessings that are so richly abundant amongst us, never forgetting what we have read in God's Word and what we have seen as we live it out. For, when we do, the promise we read this morning in The Epistle of James will be fulfilled: '*...they will be blessed in what they do.*' And so we are...

Amen.