

When Tradition Hurts the Mission

New Castle Bible Church

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Text: Mathew 15:21-39

Last week we looked at the ways that tradition undermines worship. I believe the text before us today shows how manmade tradition undermines the king's mission.

If you've not seen the play "Fiddler on the Roof," it focuses on a village of orthodox Jews living in Russia. It's the early 1900s, all the world is suddenly changing, but tradition is the constant that unites and defines their little village.

The main character, Tevya, says...

"We always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, 'How did this tradition get started?' I'll tell you. I don't know, but it's a tradition... and because of our traditions every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do."

"Traditions, traditions! Without our traditions our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof!"

Tradition defined Tevya. It defined the Pharisees, the disciples... it even defines us.

Matthew 15:2 mentions the "tradition of the elders." Tradition isn't necessarily being traditional. Tradition is anything that's passed on from one person to another. Think of your children, for instance, whatever you pass on to them is a tradition in the sense of Matthew 15:2. It can be the things we teach and deeply believe, our behaviors and patterns, our way of living and thinking. The sum total of the things we pass on, for good or for bad—that's our tradition.

So, what are we passing on to others? Well, to answer that, we are a white, American evangelical church. Various studies suggest the following about white, evangelical America...

- 1) The church. We attend services at least once a week.
- 2) The Bible. We probably own several copies.
- 3) The media. We're suspicious of anything "mainstream."
- 4) Environment. We're largely unconcerned.
- 5) The country. We're strongly patriotic.
- 6) Politics. We're Republicans.
- 7) Economics. We're capitalists.
- 8) Constitution. We're originalists.

These are some of the patterns and values of white, evangelical America. In each of these ways, and many more, we're passing something on to our children and to those around us.

The Pharisees had "the tradition of the elders," and one problem with it is that they taught their tradition as if it had divine authority—"Thus saith the Lord God!"

It was biblical for each Israelite to keep the Sabbath holy. It was not biblical for each to keep it by walking less than 1000 feet.

The Pharisees elevated their traditions to transcendent absolutes. Sometimes we are tempted to do the exact same thing with our traditions. We have a view, proof-text it with a verse, and call it biblical. *Thus saith the Lord God!*

A friend once told me that the right to bear arms is a biblical issue. *Jesus told Peter to take a sword—it's biblical.* I guess that's the end of it.

Have your convictions, but don't use the Word of God to elevate them. You're just putting words in God's mouth, using Him to elevate you and your traditions.

When we elevate the traditions of white, evangelical America, we undermine the king's mission. When we engage people who don't share our tradition—who aren't Republicans or who openly support socialism—we become defensive and then die on all the wrong hills with them. It undermines the mission of making disciples.

Let us read Matthew 15:21-39... if you're able, please stand in honor of God's Word.

Matthew 15:21-39— "And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son

of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.' But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she is crying out after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' And he answered, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee. And he went up on the mountain and sat down there. And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, so that the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.

Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, 'I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.' And the disciples said to him, 'Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?' And Jesus said to them, 'How many loaves do you have?' They said, 'Seven, and a few small fish.' And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

We see in this passage how man-made traditions undermine the King's mission.

Man-made traditions can...

- 1) Give us a wrong view of the lost

- 2) Make us comfortable avoiding the lost
- 3) Hinder us from loving the lost

I. Tradition can give us a wrong view of the lost (v. 15:21-28).

Jesus' ministry had been to the Jews, but in Matthew 15, He's far north of Galilee, deep in Gentile country—Tyre and Sidon. These cities weren't on the way to somewhere in Israel. No, they were completely out of the way. This is because Jesus was beginning His ministry with Gentiles.

All three sections of our passage today focus on Gentiles.

From helping a woman who's a Gentile
to healing many Gentiles
to feeding a great crowd of Gentiles.

It's all about Gentiles... and Matthew knew this was something different.

Israel never had a vigorous outreach program to the nations. Gentiles could become Jewish, and the Jews believed that some righteous Gentiles would share in their future blessings. This sounds okay, but let me take you back to the time of Ezra...

Six centuries prior to Matthew's Gospel, Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem and deported the Jews. When they returned in the early 500's B.C., they set about to rebuild. Ezra called the people to be pure, not marrying unbelievers nor worshipping their gods nor taking on their customs.

Ezra's call for purity was sorely misunderstood. What started as a call to holiness developed into a prejudice against Gentiles. The religious leaders of Jesus' time presumed that Gentiles were idolaters... and with idolatry comes immorality.

Sure, a Gentile could be saved. But salvation required a Gentile to carry the heavy yoke of the Pharisees' traditions. They must look like us in order to worship with us.

This kind of thinking destroys outreach. *You're welcome here... but you need to cover up those tattoos.* We would never say that, but we have ways of expressing it.

Man-made traditions. We might look down upon those who don't share our traditions. That's what happened when the disciples entered Tyre and Sidon—these ancient port cities with merchants coming and going.

The disciples were far from Judea or Galilee, and they saw a lot of people who didn't look or worship as they did. *Why did Jesus bring us here?*

"And behold!" Verse 22—"And behold! A Canaanite woman from *that* region came out and was crying, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David!'" A Canaanite? A woman? Addressing Jewish men? Canaanites were one of Israel's ancient enemies.

An ancient enemy steps forward, quite boldly, with a request... and she won't stop until she's heard. She's so persistent that the disciples "beg" Jesus—"keep begging" Him to "send her away, for she is crying out after us." *Get rid of her already! Enough is enough!!*

Contrast this response to verse 12. Matthew 15:12, "[Jesus] you know that the Pharisees were offended [by you]"

See the difference? The Pharisees were the teachers of the people, the ones who most shaped Jewish tradition at the time. Holding fast to those traditions had warped the disciples' view of outsiders.

They judged this woman as inconsequential, an annoyance unworthy of their time, a dog.

In verses 24-26, Jesus repeated back to the disciples their objections for doing ministry here...

They had a theological objection. The messiah was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. Very true... He was sent to Israel, but that didn't mean He doesn't care about Gentiles.

They also had a racial objection that the blessings of the kingdom shouldn't go to Gentile dogs. It's a Jewish kingdom with a Jewish king with Jewish blessings in a Jewish land!

Jesus repeats these objections not because He agrees, but to set the stage. Do you know why Jesus brought His disciples on this long journey deep into Gentile territory? It was to meet this woman.

He could've just said, "Guys, there's this woman in Tyre with great faith." He could've said that, but instead he showed it. He took them to her, used their objections to set the stage. Her response proved her faith.

She confesses Jesus as her Lord 3x, while begging, just hoping for a crumb of blessing... then Jesus healed her daughter and commended her faith in front of all twelve blind Jewish disciples.

The disciples viewed this woman as a problem; Jesus viewed her as a person. It's an example where the disciples' man-made traditions gave them the wrong view of people outside their circle.

II. Tradition can make us comfortable avoiding the lost (v. 29-31).

Man-made traditions can give us the wrong view of the lost. They can also make us comfortable avoiding the lost.

Jesus and his disciples have traveled south, much closer to Jewish territory, though still among Gentiles. People are coming to Jesus for healing—some were lame, others blind or mute or crippled. Three days of miracle after miracle after miracle.

As I read this, you know what stood out? There's no mention of the disciples.

They are shown in a negative light before these verses and in a negative light after these verses, but nothing at all here. It's like they weren't even there.

The disciples were present, but Matthew recorded nothing because he and the others did nothing.

Back in Matthew 10, Jesus had sent His men out to minister to their own people. He gave them power to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons. All the things that Jesus did with the Gentiles in Matthew 15, His disciples had already done with the Jews.

Hundreds of filthy Gentiles pressed to get close to Jesus to be healed. The needs were endless, the opportunities present, and the disciples had the power to work wonders... but they didn't.

They were content to watch their master minister with power to a people they didn't even want to touch.

The crowds just kept growing as Jesus changed one life after another and another. They just kept coming for three straight days until the crowd grew to some 4,000 families.

But Jesus sent us to *our* people.

Jesus' kingdom is *our* kingdom—a Jewish kingdom.

The blessings of Jesus' kingdom—those belong to *us* and *our* people.

While the disciples comfortably did nothing, the Gentiles gave glory to God.

I think of Jonah when I read this account. God sent Jonah to Gentiles, and he wasn't about to go. In Jonah's case, you know why he wouldn't preach to Nineveh? He says it's because "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love"

I knew that you are good, and I didn't want to see your goodness go to a bunch of Gentiles.

The disciples' contempt for the Canaanite woman suggest they had much in common with Jonah. *Jesus, you may be good to a bunch of Gentiles, but we'll have no part of it.*

Sadly, we can be like just that. Our church would like to reach further into our surrounding community. We want to minister to the lost, but possibly some here are saying:

That's not the mission of the church.

That's not our responsibility to go out—let the lost come to us.

Our man-made traditions, the things we believe and pass on to others, can make us comfortably disobedient. So comfortable that we may have more in common with Jonah than Jesus. So comfortable that we're okay avoiding the lost altogether. Oh, that we would be like Jesus!

III. Tradition can hinder us from loving the lost (v. 32-39).

Man-made traditions can give us a wrong view of the lost, make us comfortable avoiding them, and finally, man-made traditions can hinder our love. Hinder our love for the lost.

Three days of healing at the Sea of Galilee, and the crowds just kept coming to Jesus. Food was limited to what you could carry, and it had all been eaten by this time. Nonetheless, the people weren't going home to eat.

So fixated upon Jesus, glued to the next healing that they didn't care about eating!

That's when Jesus stopped healing to take care of everyone. It was an immense act of compassion.

Jesus asked the disciples to feed everyone, and they respond in verse 33, "Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?"

You might be scratching your head at this moment: *I thought Jesus already did this miracle?*

And you're right—look back at Matthew 14, and you'll find that Jesus fed a crowd of 5,000 families. So, here in Matthew 15, a few weeks have passed, there's a crowd of 4,000 families, and He's about to do the exact same miracle.

Why, on earth, are the disciples completely stumped? *I don't know Jesus, where are we to get enough food for all these people?* The disciples didn't forget what Jesus had done. They were making excuses—*It's desolate here, Jesus, we can't possibly do anything!*

There was a difference between the two crowds. The first crowd was Jewish, this one is Gentile. It's disciples' traditions, the things they had always heard from the Pharisees, rising to surface yet again.

Jesus fed 5,000 Jewish families—a huge miracle! He's not going to do the same for Gentiles... is He?

Jesus multiplied the meager rations of His disciples and told them to distribute the food to everyone present.

The contempt that the disciples had for the Canaanite woman isn't on display here. They weren't AWOL as before. They weren't filled with compassion or love for Gentiles, but they were present even became involved. We read how the disciples were serving, giving food to each Gentile.

Verse 37 tells us that everyone—these Jewish men and the Gentile crowd—ate what Jesus provided and were satisfied.

I like how this ends, because it causes me to wonder if there had been a change in the disciples.

Walking to Tyre and Sidon to see the faith of a Gentile
Watching Jesus heal Gentiles for three straight days
Hearing them give glory to God
Seeing Jesus feed a crowd of Gentiles
Being satisfied fellowshiping with Gentiles.

It causes me to wonder if all that time of seeing Jesus with Gentiles started to chip away at the disciples' traditions. It seems some kind of growth took place.

Matthew was there, and so was John. Fifty years later, John wrote a Gospel, and throughout John's Gospel, he emphasizes that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

Israel's messiah didn't come just to save His own people from their sins, but to reach beyond the borders of Israel to save Gentiles as well. May we not let our man-made traditions keep us from doing the same.

Conclusion

As I said when we began, Tevya believed his traditions gave his life stability and helped him please God. The truth is that he didn't know God's Word very well when he tried to quote it. Rather than find stability, he's quite shaken by the end of the play—shaky as a fiddler on a roof.

Man-made traditions can be good, but elevating them can give us a wrong view of those not like us, make us comfortable avoiding them, and hinder our love.

Man-made traditions can undermine the King's mission.

Communion

The Lord's Supper is one of our traditions at New Castle. However, this isn't a man-made tradition. I have said a good deal this morning against elevating man-made traditions. I want to encourage you to elevate biblical, God-given traditions in your life.

The Lord's Supper is something worth understanding and passing on to your children or talking about with other people. There's nothing mystical about this tradition. The bread is just a piece of baked flour and water, but this little wafer symbolizes an immense reality—the reality that God became a man and died on our behalf.

This is a tradition that Jesus started 2,000 years ago, and it's one that Christians throughout the ages have actually battled to keep it pure. It's a tradition that truly matters.

“The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me”

[Eat Bread]

“In the same way also He took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

[Drink Juice]

Before we conclude our service, let us to pause for a moment of silent prayer. Ask the Lord to help you see the lost as He sees them, to give you a heart like His and use you to reach further.

May we not elevate our man-made traditions at the expense of the King's mission.

[Prayer to Conclude Communion]

Closing Song

[Worship Team]

Benediction

Revelation 15:3b-4— “Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”