

Separating The Gospel from Custom and Tradition

Text

Mark 7:1-4 *¹Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. ²Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. ³For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. ⁴When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.*

Memory Verse

Matt. 15:3 (NIV) *Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?”*

Introduction

Do not mix up God’s message with human customs.

The Gospel is God’s good news about Jesus saving us and bringing us back to Him. But the first people it was preached to were Hebrews /

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Israelites, who had their own customs and traditions.

Jesus and the Apostles did not ‘trash’ every Hebrew custom. But they were careful to separate God’s command from cultural habit (Mark 7:1-4).

If we do not do that today, we can end up thinking that the culture in which we live equates to Christian Faith.

Objectives

To understand the difference between the Gospel and commandment versus culture and tradition, with a specific focus on baptism, fasting, and gender roles within the assembly.

To know what is actually required for salvation and what is not required.

To learn how the Apostles adapted their message for different audiences.

Presentation

1. Baptism – Obedience, Not Argument

(1) What we know:

Jesus was baptized to fulfil all righteousness (Matt. 3:15).

He then commanded baptism (Matt. 28:19).

The apostles obeyed (Acts 2:38, Acts 8:38, Acts 10:48).

Whoever receives the apostles and obeys their teaching, receives Jesus and the Father who sent Him (Matt. 10:40).

If we truly believe, we will want to obey (John 5:44).

(2) The question Jesus did not answer:

Whether John's baptism was "from heaven or men" (Luke 20:4). Jesus did not answer His own question so we will not answer it either.

(3) What saves:

Not water. Christ. The thief on the tree beside Christ had no water but heard "today shalt thou be with me" (Luke 23:43).

Salvation is by faith and confession of faith.

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Rom. 10:9 ... *if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*

Point for us: baptism is a commandment, not a tradition, and if you can be baptized, you should obey joyfully like the eunuch (Acts 8:38). If you truly believe, you will obey if you can. If you cannot obey, trust Jesus like the thief. Water does not save you, Jesus does (Acts 4:12).

2. Fasting

In Hebrew culture, fasting was part of seeking God. In our culture many people fast for all sorts of reasons. Where does fasting sit biblically?

Matt. 4:1-2 says “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry.” The Spirit led Him. The purpose was testing. The result was dependence on God’s Word (“Man shall not live by bread alone” (Matt. 4:4)).

Jesus also ascribed value to fasting in Mark 9:29, when the disciples asked why they could not cast the unclean spirit out of a boy:

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Mark 9:28-29 ²⁸ *And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?”* ²⁹ *So He said to them, “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.”*

Jesus often talks about how it is unbelief that prevents power from moving, and how it is belief that gives us power. Belief can be strengthened through fasting and prayer.

Point for us: Fasting is not a command for every believer every day. But it is a tool that Jesus used and talked about (“when you fast” (Matt. 6:16-18)), and we are followers of Jesus. If the Spirit leads you to fast, obey. If He does not, do not make it a rule. By Jesus’s own words, prayer and fasting strengthens, but Jesus Himself is enough for our salvation (Col. 2:10).

3. Custom vs Command in Gender Roles

Today many countries have a culture of equality: men and women are equal under the law of the land, and discrimination according to gender is an offence under that law.

What does the Bible say?

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God's order:

- * sets women as helpers from their creation in Genesis (Gen. 2:18):

Gen. 2:18 (KJV) *And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.*

- * does not set women in authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12);
- * does make men and women equal in identity and equal heirs (Gal. 3:28), with equal access to God.

Under the Law of Moses, men served in the sanctuary, women did not. Only men aged 20+ were counted in a census and required to bring offerings (Ex. 12:37, Ex. 30:14, Deut. 16:16-17).

In Isaiah 3, a chapter of judgment, God describes the path of women ruling as one of error:

Isa. 3:12 *“As for My people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them.*

O My people! Those who lead you cause you to err, and destroy the way of your paths.”

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In the New Testament, the role of elder (bishop, overseer) within the Church assembly is clearly given to men:

1 Tim. 3:1-2 ¹ *This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. ² A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behaviour, hospitable, able to teach.*

Women are not permitted to teach or have authority over a man, but should adorn themselves with good works:

1 Tim. 2:9-12 ⁹ *...women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, ¹⁰ but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works. ¹¹ Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. ¹² And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.*

The reason is rooted in creation (Gen. 2:18 above) and the fall:

1 Tim. 2:13-14 ¹³ *For Adam was formed first, then Eve. ¹⁴ And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.*

Paul reiterates this in 1 Cor. 14:34-35:

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1 Cor. 14:34-35 ³⁴ *Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says.*

³⁵ *And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.*

What Paul says is not custom or tradition, it is the commandment of the Lord, as Paul says in 1 Cor. 14:34 (“as the law also says”) and also goes on to state again:

1 Cor. 14:36-38 ³⁶ *Or did the word of God come originally from you? Or was it you only that it reached?*

³⁷ *If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord.* ³⁸ *But if anyone is ignorant, let him be ignorant.*

Women prophesy, share the gospel, sing psalms and make melody (Eph. 5:19), but they are not in authority in the assembly.

Joel 2:28 *“And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.”*

Philip had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). Priscilla taught Apollos (Acts 18:26), but

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privately with her husband (“they took him aside”), not in the congregation.

The “speaking” forbidden by Paul is the kind that teaches doctrine, judges prophecy, or exercises authority over the congregation. That is the role of elders (1 Tim. 3:2, 5). Paul says women do not do that, but they do prophesy, speaking and singing by inspiration.

Miriam sang by inspiration:

Ex. 15:20-21 ²⁰ *Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.* ²¹ *And Miriam answered them: “Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea!”*

Deborah judged and sang (Judg. 4:4, 5:1), Anna prophesied (Luke 2:36-38).

Deborah was a prophetess, “and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment”. She did not appoint herself over them. She prophesied (spoke) God’s word (“Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded...” (Judges 4:6)), and men submitted to God’s word through her. When war came, Deborah told Barak the Lord’s command to

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go, and Barak went with ten thousand men under his command.

Deborah exercised prophetic authority, speaking God's word, but she did not hold the office of elder or kingship over Israel. God can use women mightily without giving them eldership.

In summary, men and women are equal in identity and equal heirs (Gal. 3:28), with equal access to God, but they are not equal in function. The Spirit gifts daughters to prophesy (Joel 2:28), the Word orders who shepherds the flock (Acts 20:28).

4. Tradition in Language and Audience

Matthew wrote to Jews, so he used "Kingdom of Heaven" and started from Abraham (Matt. 1:1, 13:33).

Luke wrote to Gentiles, so he used "Kingdom of God" and started from Adam (Luke 3:38, 13:20-21).

Mark explained Hebrew words for his Roman readers (Mark 5:41, 7:11).

Paul preached differently to Jews and Gentiles (Acts 13:14-17 vs Acts 17:22-31, 1 Cor. 9:19-23).

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1 Cor. 9:19-23 ¹⁹ *For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more;* ²⁰ *and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law;* ²¹ *to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law;* ²² *to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.* ²³ *Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.*

The message stays the same, but the method changes to fit the audience. That is wisdom, not compromise.

Conclusion

Keep the Gospel central. The Gospel is the good news that through Jesus's death, burial, resurrection, and return, we can be restored to God's original plan (Rom. 14:1-8).

The first believers had their own customs. Those customs could be used as a platform for the Gospel, but they are not the Gospel itself. We all live in countries with customs which may on occasion contradict the commandments of God. Our job is to preach Christ, not culture. Use

culture where it helps, drop it and do not follow it where it hinders. Put the commandments of God first and foremost (Eccl. 12:13-14).

Eccl. 12:13-14 (KJV) ¹³ *Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.*

¹⁴ *For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.*

Evaluation Questions & Answers

1. Where was the centre of indoctrination of the Gentiles on the Hebrews' tradition?

- * In the synagogues built in Gentile cities, where Hebrew Scriptures were read every Sabbath (Acts 15:21, John 7:34-35). Gentile proselytes picked up Hebrew customs there.

2. Which law / custom in Israel hindered Mary from speaking publicly in the Church in Jerusalem?

- * The pattern established through God's design in the Old Testament was that only men were priests, only men sat on Israel's throne. The elders appointed in Deut. 1:13 were wise men. Deborah judged, but Israel "came up to

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her” – she did not appoint herself over them. When war came, Barak led the army (Judg. 4:6, 9).

- * God used woman prophets but He never made them priests, kings, or shepherds of the nation.

3. What did Jesus say about baptism?

- * “Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15), and “baptizing them” (Matt. 28:19). So we obey. We do not argue Luke 20:8.

Prayer

Father, thank You for the Gospel which is bigger than any culture. Give me wisdom to hold onto Christ and His truth, and not to confuse it with human tradition. Help me to see what is eternal and what is cultural, so that I can live and share the faith clearly. In Jesus’s name, Amen.