

# KING OF KINGS LUTHERAN CHURCH



**Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

*A Clean Heart Puts Christ First*

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It is a challenge to understand people who are different from ourselves. I don't think that I can understand what it is like to be short. In my world, I duck when I go down stairs — just in case. In my world, many light fixtures are hung far too low and I need to avoid them. In my world, some cars don't have near enough leg room. I'll bet that some here have never gone car shopping and immediately said "no" to a model simply because it didn't have enough headroom on the driver side.

My height is a minor difference. But bigger differences in life can lead us to misunderstand others. I think that racism often has roots in our inability to understand anything but our own ways. The foods I like are the best ones; the language I speak is the best; the customs I follow are the most normal. There must be something wrong with those who do things differently!

Let's be honest: our inability to understand those who are different than we are creates problems in this world. But it really stirs up a mess in spiritual matters. Even within the Christian Church, our traditions and cultural expectations can become firmly held beliefs that we think shape our relationship with God.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day had this problem. They had firmly held traditions. They believed a ceremonial washing before eating was required. This wasn't just your mom telling you to wash your hands before you eat; this was a spiritual matter to them — unwashed hands was a sin! They so firmly held these traditions that they couldn't help but point out to Jesus that his disciples didn't follow the traditions of the elders. They didn't quote a Bible verse to Jesus. They even admitted that it was a tradition.

Jesus saw the problem with their tradition. **"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.'"**

The religion the Pharisees were practicing wasn't about God's Word, it was about the traditions that they had followed for generations.

Now, let's consider the tightrope that this text has us walk. Traditions are not inherently bad or wrong. But tradition and God's Word are not in a contest with each other. The Word of God is so much more important that there is no comparison between the two.

There are many things that Lutherans traditionally do. For example, in worship we follow a style of worship that is called *liturgical*. The form of the liturgy has changed over the years, but the style has remained fairly consistent. But Lutherans cannot claim that our traditions make us Christians. To do so would be dishonest to ourselves.

Another common example comes to mind. Lutherans are taught to pray before they eat. It is a good and useful custom. (It is not commanded in the Bible.) But if you think that uttering a memorized set of words before you eat expresses real gratitude to God for the food he has provided, you are misleading yourself. The custom itself is good; but mindlessly spoken words don't mean anything to God. The custom itself is not holy.

Worship and prayers before meals are just two examples of customs. And perhaps you can see why this is a tightrope act. Customs are not bad. But when they are elevated to too high of a position, as they were by the Pharisees, they become a twisted form of Christianity that distracts us from the truth. Our identity as the people of God is not based on the habits that we find mutually beneficial, but on our Savior and what he has done for us.

This text is good for Lutherans to think about. We are well-versed in the idea that our good works do not save us! But our customs can subtly become good works that we look to instead of Jesus.

Jesus tells us why even our best customs or efforts are not good enough. **"Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. . . . For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All**

**these evils come from inside and defile a person.”**

The outward acts that you perform do not make you any better before God. Those acts cannot change you, because by nature what is inside you is wrong. Humanity has never liked that teaching; but God has never changed what he says. By nature, what comes out of our hearts is sinful. Left to ourselves, we could not save ourselves. Good works or good customs that might make us look good before God are impossible. Bad hearts don't produce good works. Bad hearts lead away from God. Sinful hearts deserve death . . . and hell.

Jesus was telling us that he doesn't want our efforts to save ourselves. You've probably heard someone say that we should give Jesus our hearts. Jesus tells us in our text that he isn't interested in our hearts — they are sinful.

While it isn't specifically stated in this text, Jesus is reminding us of the importance of believing in him. What we need is not the right custom or enough of the right works; we need a Savior. Our salvation is based entirely on what he did to take away our sins. The cross stands at the center of the Christian faith, not our customs. He died as punishment for our wickedness. He rose because his sacrifice was perfect and complete. Your sin is gone because of Jesus. Through faith in him you are given this forgiveness.

So if everything depends on Jesus (and it does!), what are we to make of our customs? Can we just get rid of them and change everything anytime we feel like it?

Here is the thing with customs: We need to understand them. If you're defense of the Lutheran liturgy is simply "We've always done it that way," your defense is weak. If you say prayers before a meal because that's how you've always done it, you are slipping into the mindset that had fully engulfed the Pharisees in our text. You are on the road to ceremonies that can be mindlessly repeated with the false idea that you've pleased God.

The fundamental issue is to consider where the heart is toward God. Through faith in Christ, the heart is changed. What was dark and sinful is made new and is filled with God's love. The believer's heart is eager to grow closer to God and eager to thank God for his blessings. Believers want to thank God before a meal as an expression of true gratitude.

Lutheran worship follows the liturgical structure because believers have recognized the way the liturgy proclaims Christ! It isn't just a mindless custom, but a custom with deep meaning. The Word and the Sacraments stand at the center of our worship. Only the Word and Sacraments connect us to Christ by proclaiming the gospel to our hearts.

You can pick any custom. If you just do it because that is way you've always done it, be warned. You could slip into the thoughtless worship of the Pharisees who held to their traditions more than they cared about God's Word. At the same time, don't quote this story as grounds to jettison all customs. They can serve a very beneficial purpose and are often worthy of repeating.

Jesus' words remind us that we need to understand the Biblical basis for what we do. When what we do and the Bible don't match or when our customs are more important than God's Word, get rid of the custom! When you do it, just because you've always done it that way, take time to learn more. Let your faith rest on God's Word, not an old familiar habit.

In a moment I'll tell you to stand and we will sing "Create in me." It is a customary, liturgical song in Lutheran worship. (Although it is a recent addition to the liturgy. And it was intended to be a part of the offering, not a response to the sermon.) The song, based on Psalm 51, hits on the heart of the matter before us today. We need God to work in us. He does! Through the gospel, your heart is changed and your sin is gone. In worship and in life, God is more concerned about your heart resting on his Word than he is with your customs or actions. He gives more to us than we could give to him.

Take the time to understand what you do. Let God's Word shape you, not just the way it's always been. Then your heart will be clean and new. And the actions that pour out of that new heart will please God. Amen.

Pentecost 15  
September 6, 2015

