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“A Tradition to Live By”

Text: Mark 7:1-13; Ephesians 5:22-33; Isaiah 29:11-19

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Ah, the good ol' days, when “*Wives submit to your husbands*” was the controversial thing about marriage! Nowadays, marriage has been twisted and distorted by some, kicked aside by others, and thrown into the scrap heap by many. What God instituted in the beginning as a good and holy institution, for a man and a woman to create a family and find delight in one another, has been relegated to a tradition of man which can be disregarded or changed at will. Or at least, by the stroke of a single Supreme Court pen.

We should not be surprised. It is what happens whenever the Word of God is removed as the foundation of truth. The traditions of men, the wisdom of men, the current tide of societal thinking will come rushing in to fill the vacuum - *and always to the detriment of man*. For nothing we can come up with can ever take the place of the Word of God. It will always be inferior, and make us inferior to how God created us to be.

Exhibit 1-A for Jesus was the Pharisaical tradition of “Corban.” The Pharisees, Mark tell us, had many such traditions, but this one seems particularly egregious to Jesus. For besides God, the only other persons to get their own commandment were father and mother. For father and mother, a man and a woman joined in marriage and through the one flesh union bringing forth children, are deserving of special honor and love. The family, as such, is the building block of society. And so God protects it as of first importance. Even before protecting life in the fifth commandment, protecting the gift of sexuality in the sixth, the gift of possessions in the seventh, the gift of a good reputation in the eighth, and the gift of contentment in the ninth and tenth -before all these He protects father and mother. They are first after Him, and not only are we not to despise or anger them, but we are *to honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them* (Small Catechism, Explanation to the Fourth Commandment). And that, Luther would go on to say, no matter how weird you think your parents are - and who doesn't, at some point in their lives, think their parents are a bit odd and embarrassing. No matter, God said, honor them.

But instead of doing that, the Pharisees created a tradition which effectively did away with the Fourth Commandment - the tradition of *Corban*, a word meaning “gift to God.” A tradition that probably started out well, but had deteriorated and become corrupt. It was a pretty neat trick, actually. The Pharisees (or anyone really) would pronounce their possessions as “Corban” - that is, dedicated to God. Which sounds good, right? Except that what was so dedicated didn't actually have to be immediately given to God. For

example, your land could be dedicated as *Corban*, and yet you could continue to live on it. It was a designation of intent, voluntarily made, and whether or not you ever actually followed through and fulfilled your vow, you were from that time on *prohibited* from using that property for the support of your parents. And so what was happening here was not only was the Fourth Commandment out the window, but it cost you nothing, and you got to look super holy at the same time!

So Jesus was not pleased. Instead of caring for their parents, and instead of helping and serving their closest neighbor, they come to Jesus and wonder why aren't His disciples doing what they're doing; how come they don't keep the tradition of the elders; why they were eating with hands unwashed, and therefore "defiled."

Traditions. The words literally means that which is handed down, or handed over. Every culture and society has them. They are neither good or bad in and of themselves - they are just what we do because it's what our parents did, what our culture does. Certain ways handed down, or handed over. We put our hand over our heart during the national anthem. We sing "Happy Birthday." We eat traditional foods on holidays, and use traditional decorations. All good things. Things that have meaning for us and make us who we are. Another way of speaking of those things is that they are the folk culture of our society. There are different kinds of culture. High culture is the best stuff that transcends cultures and is shared by cultures - the best music, the best art, the best literature. Pop culture is the stuff that is popular at the moment but is here today and gone tomorrow. Folk culture is what is handed down from generation to generation. Traditions that bind us together and inform who we are.

But when that culture or tradition comes into conflict with the Word of God, something has to give. Because who are we? Are we who the culture, the tradition says we are, or are we who God says we are? Those who have lost the foundation of the Word of God have only one choice - the culture, tradition, society, dictates. And we see it happening in our world today, with marriage, with the value of life, with gender. And again, we shouldn't be surprised that this is happening; that sinful men do sinful things. But when these things come into the Church, then something has gone very wrong.

For as Christians, we dare not allow the traditions of men, the culture of man, the opinions of society, to replace the Word of God. Marriage as the union of a man and a woman is the way God established it. The value of life is non-negotiable. Gender is not whatever we say it is, but what God created. *As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be*, is how we say it in the liturgy. The Word of the Lord endures forever.

This is a battle that is not new. Jesus today quoted from the prophet Isaiah whose prophetic career was some 700 years before Jesus and the Pharisees walked the earth. Satan has been attacking the Word of God from the very beginning. Sinful men do sinful things.

Traditions. In the Bible, there are two very significant times when something was traditioned, or handed over. Not the only two times, but two significant, important, times. The first was when Eve *handed over* the forbidden fruit to Adam and he ate. That “tradition,” that handing over, plunged the world into sin and is the reason why we are born sinful and unclean. Eve handed over and Adam received a “tradition” not of God but of man.

But then years later, there was another *handing over* - when Judas handed over the Son of God and He was crucified. But this “tradition,” this handing over, got the world out of its mess of sin; this tradition was of God and the reason why Jesus was born. And just before this, Jesus did a *handing over* of His own - He handed over His Body and Blood to His disciples, and commanded them to continue handing it over - handing HIM over - generation after generation, for the forgiveness of sin, for life and salvation. That in opposition to the tradition of sin, the Church hand over life; hand over Jesus.

And that really is the choice. When the traditions of men conflict with what is handed over in the Word of God, Jesus is at stake. Life and salvation are at stake.

For in sending His Son, in handing over Jesus, God has done - as Isaiah said - a most wonderful thing! The most important thing. Wonder upon wonder, as He hands over His Son to atone for our sin, gives us this forgiveness, makes us His own, and promises us eternal life. As, Isaiah prophesied, He makes us who were deaf to hear His Word, and opens our eyes to see His glory.

It’s difficult, though, isn’t it? We receive what is handed down to us by the world in great doses, and the Word of God . . . well, how much in comparison? And sometimes the traditions of men can sound very convincing and even look holy and good at times. But what has been handed down and handed over to you is Christ and His Spirit. What has been handed down and handed over to you is forgiveness and life. What has been handed down and handed over to you is true wisdom, not the ever-shifting opinions of time and place. The Word of the Lord endures forever for the Lord endures forever. This world will not.

So what of you? Well, the Word of God was made flesh and has united Himself as one flesh to you. Jesus has forever united God and man in one body, and brought into that union through Holy Baptism, you have life. When you sin, you have life in His forgiveness. When you are anxious and worried, you have life in His promises. And when you die, you have life because He will raise you with Himself and take you to Himself. Or as Paul put it: Christ gave Himself for you to wash you clean and make you holy, without blemish, and give you life and a future with Him. He nourishes you and cherishes you and cares for you. You will not and cannot find a better spouse than He.

So shall we trade that for the traditions of men? Shall we look for a better way? A greater truth? A different life? Or shall we joyfully submit to such a God? To such a Saviour? It isn't really much of a choice, is it? And then also in our marriages, in our callings, in our lives, do the same - laying down our lives for others, submitting to them in love, handing over to them the same forgiveness and love we have received. That, it seems to me, is something worth handing down and handing over. That is living in Christ, and He in us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.