

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Mark 7:5-16

Sermon Title: "Dedicated to Each Other" (Traveling through Mark's Gospel)

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Jesus gets in another argument with the Pharisees and scribes. It isn't the first time – it will not be the last time.

Jesus has been moving around, sharing the good news of life in God. He goes from town to town, telling people something that they really need to hear. God has a plan for their lives. God has a way he wants them to live, so they may have a full-enough life here on earth, but an even fuller life in heaven. People have got to hear Jesus – they need God in their lives. But the Pharisees and scribes don't want to hear Jesus. They are tired of hearing his message about life with God. They are fed up with people turning to Jesus, and acting as though he is their Messiah or something. The Pharisees and scribes have to say something to Jesus about what he is doing, and this begins another argument between the three of them. And Jesus will not back down.

The argument in Mark 7 has to do with upholding traditions. The Pharisees and scribes don't

understand why Jesus will not uphold the traditions of the elders, which have been practiced and passed down for centuries. “These traditions are widely accepted by all the religious people,” the Pharisees and scribes seem to be saying, so why isn’t Jesus doing the same?

Jesus could have laughed at what the Pharisees and scribes were saying. It must have tickled him to hear them argue against the Son of God about what is traditionally acceptable or not. Instead of laughing in their faces, Jesus points to the prophet Isaiah and says, “Well did he prophesy these words, saying, ‘This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. In vain they worship me, while teaching the doctrines and commandments of people’.” Jesus points to a time, in which the people were sinning greatly against God and his commandments, so much so that they had to be thrown into exile. Even with the Babylonian army systematically tearing down cities and yanking people from their homes, the people still thought they were doing right by uphold the traditions of their ancestors, when those traditions had nothing to do with God. They were wasting their time by following a bunch of rules that brought them not one step closer to God. “Laying aside the commandments of God,” Jesus said, “you pick up the traditions of

people.” In essence, they were laying aside God for what was comfortable to them.

At this time, Jesus could have mentioned any human tradition that the Pharisees and scribes were upholding. We could be sure that Jesus had a host of traditions of the elders that he could have highlighted, thus proving how wrong the Pharisees and scribes were. Jesus chooses this one: putting aside the Fifth Commandment of God for the tradition of Corban, meaning “gift of God”. We have never seen such a thing in our lives, but the tradition of Corban supposedly was practiced by the religious elite on children of a household. Basically, the Pharisees allowed certain children to avoid the responsibility of honoring their parents by placing Corban upon themselves. If a child “corban-ed” himself, he was totally dedicated to God and not to anyone else, not even his parents. Thus, the Fifth Commandment became null and void for that particular family. The child was not obligated to help his parents in any way, even if they were sick or destitute, and the parents couldn’t make any demands on their child. The child was dedicated to the work of God exclusively, whatever that work was. Any other work done was considered a sin against God.

We may not know why Jesus pointed to this one offense against God's commandments, when he could have picked any other. It fits quite nicely with our special day today, Father's Day. We know how fractured families are today. Many stresses and strains add to the dysfunction of a family, and can tear that family apart.

Although the tradition of Corban is not observed today, children and parents may still "corban" themselves to things other than their families. They may dedicate themselves to things that add stress and strain to the family, whether they realize it or not.

Statistics say that children nowadays spend 7.5 hours a day in front of the TV. That means, for the average child or teenager during the school year, he or she may have around 8 hours of sleep, 30 minutes to an hour on the bus, around 6 hours of school, a few hours of after school activities, and a few hours of homework. That makes about 5 hours in one day left at home with the family, and the average child or teenager may fill it with TV. If it isn't TV, it is Facebook or Twitter, it is Internet gaming, it is videogames on the TV, it is something to distract them from family. If the statistics are correct, who do the average young people honor, Mom and Dad or SpongeBob or iCarly or MTV? To whom or to what

have children and youth “corban-ed” – dedicated – themselves?

Children should spend time with friends. They should learn how to socialize with others. But do parents know who these friends are? Have we met these friends, and approved of our children hanging out with them? When the son or daughter comes home, and cops an attitude with parents, arguing with them, telling them to leave them alone, who do the parents think they learned it from? Could be from those friends that the parents don't know about, who spend no time with their own parents, who don't care to spend time with their own parents?

For children and youth who say they do not like their parents, how much time do they spend with them? Do they listen to anything their parents say, realizing that their moms and dads are trying to build them up into responsible, even spiritual, adults? Children and youth need to be aware of who or what they may be “corban-ing” themselves to. Such things are putting undue strain and stress on the family, and sadly children and youth suffer greatly from the dysfunction.

Parents aren't off the hook, either. Some of the stress and strain on family might be due to something

parents are doing, or not doing. The Fifth Commandment says, “Honor your mother and father,” but it also implies that mothers and father are honorable toward each other and their children. They too cannot step around and ignore altogether the Fifth Commandment, as the Pharisees and scribes loved to do.

On the radio Tuesday morning, I was listening to an adult son interviewing his father. Since Father’s Day was coming up, the radio station decided to have the son speak with his father about his own father. “What was he like?” was the first question. The father said that his father was the original workaholic. He was always working, he said. When he wasn’t working long hours on the job, he would come home and do work on the house. Apparently, the man built their house from scratch, even fashioning the bricks by his own hand. Any of us could be impressed with a man who can form his own bricks and then put them in a building, but all that father, or grandfather, did was work. The father of the grandfather said nothing about the interaction that he had with his family. In fact, the son doing the interview asked, “Did grandpa ever do family things with you?” and the answer was no. He never went to games and never took the family anywhere, because he had “corban-ed” himself to

working. The grandpa died from a stroke at an early age, and the father said he missed him and wished he hadn't living most of his formative days without a dad.

When a child is asked to describe his father, and the first thing that comes out of his mouth is, "He was the original workaholic," you know the family suffered for it. This reminds me of another story about a father who was lying in the hospital from a massive heart attack. His estranged teenage son was standing over him. The son and father did not get along, and the father couldn't understand why. "Son, I worked many jobs for you to give you money to buy whatever you wanted," the father said with tubes coming out of his nose and wires hanging from his body. "I made your life comfortable. I bought you what you wanted, things that other kids don't have. Why did you fight me?" The son answered, "Dad, I didn't want your money or the things. I wanted your love." This is why the son hated his father: there was no love shared with him.

Jesus always had arguments with the Pharisees and scribes, because rules are what mattered to them, not relationships or love. The Pharisees and scribes looked at the sin of society and reacted against it with rules. You must do this and you must do that to get

things right. True, we should follow rules when it comes to dealing with people. But the “rules” are created out of the relationships we have with people. We treat each other with respect, we serve each other any way we can, and we build a rapport that grows stronger every time we get together. Those are the “rules” built on not getting thing right but build on helping each other live. We never point to them and say, “These are the rules.” We just grow in relationships, and the “rule” is to continue to grow in relationship, and we are more than happy to do that.

The problem of the Pharisees and scribes are this: the rules were more important to them than relationships. “The commandment of God was that the claim of human love and human ties comes first; the commandment of the [Pharisees and] scribes was that the claim of legal rules and regulations should come first.”¹ Jesus plainly argues that they are wrong. This is not what God the Father wants of us.

Jesus could have picked out any commandment, but he chose the Fifth Commandment. Honor is crucial in any family. Honor among parents and children and youth are essential. The family is the first place in which we discover how to live with others.

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, 174.

The family is the safe haven for learning how to respect, love, argue and resolve, develop good communication skills, and develop a healthy concern for all human beings. Jesus knew this could not happen if family members are “corban-ing” themselves to other distractions. It doesn’t matter if it is called “the tradition of the elders” or “the norms of society,” if they go against God’s will for families to grow stronger, they have no place in the home. If these so-called “traditions” and “norms” place rules above relationships, or “what everybody else is doing” over “what God wants us to do,” they need to be eliminated.

Going back to that radio interview I mentioned, the one I heard on Tuesday, the son asked his father toward the end of the interview, “What did you learn from your father?” The answer was, “If you want something, you have to work hard for it.” Too many times when we hear this statement, we assume working hard has to do exclusively with a job, money, and possessions. If you want it, go after it: a better paying job, a bigger house, a nicer car, a bigger portfolio of wealth. Are these the only things we should pursue in life? Are these the things God wants us to pursue, or is there more? Is there something better that God wants us to work hard for?

If you want something, go after it: this also applies

to having a strong family. If you want a strong marriage, go after it. If you want your children to respect you, go after them with respect and love. If you want parents to nurture you, go after them with open arms and open hearts. If you want a strong family, go after it. The phrase doesn't just apply to work or money or things.

The father in that radio interview said that what he went after was not what his own father, the grandfather, went after. He worked hard for his family, yes, but he also went to games. He spent time with his family, taking them places so they can have fun together. He encouraged his children in school and in play, and supported them in whatever they wanted to pursue.

This is the positive note the interview ended on, from the "original workaholic" to family bonds that were strong. The son who conducted the interview thanked his father for being there for him and the rest of the family. Anybody who listened to the radio that morning could be sure that no distractions were going to keep that family going forward.