

Beyond Tradition  
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James 1:22-25, 27 / Mark 7:1-9  
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James 1:22-25, 27 (NRSV)

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Mark 7:1-9 (NRSV)

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!"

Every church that has been around for any length of time has developed its own traditions. Because they have become a part of the congregational culture they are often assumed rather than explained. The longer you have participated, the less you are aware.

Listen to these words from seasoned pastor Gordon MacDonald:

Tradition is a stage of shelf life where people do certain things over and over again but have no idea why. . . And to stop doing those things would be like going through withdrawal. (*Who Stole my Church*, p.86-87)

Listen to a few simple examples from declining churches that remain committed to traditions:

The rhythm of worship life is Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening – the tradition continues even as numbers dwindle and despite other obvious options.

A children's time is an opportunity for the congregation to welcome children's active participation in the service – the tradition continues even in the absence of children.

A church name that no longer attracts but rather scares off potential visitors – the tradition continues even as members are aware it's no longer appropriate.

In his recent book recounting his experience of trying to move a New Hampshire church beyond tradition, Gordon MacDonald confronts the name change issue. Listen in to a part of one character's response to that idea. John has been actively involved in the congregation for 25 years, has overseen multiple building renovation projects and is a widely respected leader.

John slapped his open hand down on the table, and several people were visibly startled. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice shaking, "but I'm getting angrier and angrier about this. The church has had the same name for more than 150 years. It's been good enough for every generation that's

come along until now. . . Does anyone care anymore what people like me think? Pretty soon there's going to be no reason for me to be a part of this church any longer. And changing the name is the last straw. . . " (p.155)

Tradition is at work in the life of the church today and our Gospel lesson indicates it was around back then too.

This isn't the first time the religious leaders have challenged Jesus on his view of common piety nor will it be the last. Earlier disagreements focused on

Sharing table fellowship with outcasts (2:15-17)

Fasting (2:18-22)

Observing the Sabbath (2:23-28)

This time the issue is about washing. Mark tells us, in an over generalized way, that the Pharisees and all the Jews don't eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing holding to the teaching of the elders. They don't eat unless they wash because it's the tradition.

In response, Jesus makes sure they know that this assumed noncompliance is not a sign of ignorance or disobedience, but because of a deeper and more meaningful obedience begun by the prophets and now expanded by Jesus himself as he teaches and invites people to follow his way.

Dr. Heidi Husted-Armstrong, a Presbyterian (PCUSA) pastor, writes these words:

Jesus saw a preoccupation with the external when he looked at the scribes -- the expert Bible teachers, the religion professors with their Ph.D.s in theology and hermeneutics -- and the Pharisees -- the devout guardians of the faith, the religion experts, the senior pastors and serious churchgoers. These people knew the holiness code cover to cover and could quote you chapter and verse. They'd become "purity professionals," ritual specialists.

But something was wrong, something was missing. The more they focused on outward actions, the less attention they gave to inner attitudes. They were going through the motions but losing sight of their deeper motivations. They focused on the rules but neglected a relationship with the living God. They gave lip service but did not give themselves in loving service. They washed their hands but did not have a clean heart.

Tradition mattered a great deal to the established religious leaders in Jesus' time. While I don't know your particular story, I suspect you have watched more than a few religious leaders uphold tradition and have done so yourself as well.

Let me inquire about your experience is by asking a rather unusual question: Are you an elephant?

I borrow this question from Michael Martinez, who explains his experience in using the question in this way:

Are you an elephant? When I ask this question during my lectures I get one of three responses: laughter, confusion or offense.

If you have ever gone to the circus you've seen this elephant trainer's principle in action. By that I mean the huge four-ton elephant shackled by one leg. At the end of the shackle is a small wooden stake dug into the ground. Hard to believe but true, that elephant is being limited by that short chain and the small stake.

This is possible now because when the elephant was young, the owner took him and shackled him with a large, heavy metal chain. For days, and even weeks, the young elephant struggled to get free, but all he did was cause the chain to cut deep into his leg. Eventually he gave up and realized there was no way he could go anywhere when there is something tied around his leg. Now all it takes is a small rope and stake in the ground. Once the elephant feels the resistance against his leg, he stops. It's just a small piece of rope around his leg, but heavy shackles around his mind.

So I ask you again, "are you an elephant?" The answer is yes. Most of us have in some form bought into some conditioning that is self-imposed and is greatly limiting our lives. We have created our own stake in the ground that limits our achievement.

**Are there places in your life as a Christian that you cannot travel because you are shackled by tradition?**

Did you know that an elephant who has never known the limiting experience of a shackle can walk up to 25 miles in a day, but one that is shackled may be limited to far fewer than 25 steps?

**Are there times when you are open to allowing others to point out your reliance upon tradition?**

**Can you see your way to change and transformation that puts tradition in its proper place?**

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We move from Jesus' reminder of the powerful shackle of tradition in Mark's Gospel to James for a lesson on the danger of knowledge as an end rather than an empowering means.

The way we tend to do church as Presbyterians is such that we are prone to be rather intellectual at times. There is a reason we have been called the Frozen Chosen.

Our worship tends to engage our minds above all else.

We value education and learning. In addition to first class teachers and leading edge curriculum for children and youth, we expect high quality opportunities for adults: lectures, classes, and Bible Studies.

And, as a result, we do know a lot. Few of us would qualify as theological novices.

Learning is necessary. Knowing is important. But, from time-to-time, we need to be reminded of the illustration in James:

Picture a man or woman who goes to a mirror and upon looking observes what is wrong and needs to be fixed. Instead of acting to fix the obvious visual defects they walk away and do nothing at all.

At times, we prefer to stop with the hearing and knowing.

Tom Bandy, a church development guru and ecumenical pastor tells this story:

The retreat was being held in a lodge beside a lake. During the break, we all gathered on the beach to watch the kids play. One child was dressed in swimsuit, bathing hat, plastic flotation "duck", and snorkel. She kept running down to the edge of the water, dipping her feet into the lake, yelping, and running back to her towel. All the observers laughed heartily. Later during dinner at the lodge, I overheard someone ask the little girl what she did that afternoon. "I went swimming," she proudly declared.

The retreat participants were less amused, however, when I pointed out that this was a parable of their church. The church is on the edge of the great sea of God's mission. They are dressed in swimsuits. They have all the resources for swimming. Yet they spend all their time running down to the water's edge, wading in the shallows, yelping, and running back to the comfort of the sanctuary and boardroom. . . The most amazing thing is that when a sociologist asks them how they spent the previous year, congregational leaders declare, "We went swimming!"

**What about you?**

**Do you consider yourself a part of this congregation and proudly don your swimming attire with regularity yet never actually go swimming?**

**Are there times when you stand before a mirror and see your hair out of place and your clothing unbuttoned and walk away and do nothing?**

**Is it within your comfort zone to learn, but beyond it to put that knowledge into action?**

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Henri Nowen, renowned author and priest, grasps the disconnect when he writes:

Too often our help remains hanging somewhere between our minds and our hands.

James builds upon that disconnect with a needed reminder that we must be doers not merely hearers of God's word. The church and individual members are both called to take what they have learned and put it into practice.

As a church we are busy doing a lot of great ministry within, but thankfully also beyond the walls of this building. Our job is to get involved and to stay involved. Like the Nike slogan suggests: just do it.

The larger the congregation, the more options it can offer for service. The American consumer culture and the megachurch build-it-and-they-will-come mentality lead some congregations to have options that number into the hundreds.

A colleague related to me a story of a strategic planning meeting at one such large church. As ministry leaders talked of building the already incredibly large menu of options into something even bigger and better a consultant stepped in and offered some needed wisdom.

You have many high functioning leaders all of whom are seeking to start new ministries as quickly as possible and with relative independence. As group it appears your trying to climb a rather steep ladder and to do so at an ever increasing rate of speed. You are going rung to rung with more ministry options than ever and proposing to climb ever higher. Maybe now is the time to stop climbing and see that the ladder you are on is leaning against the wrong building.

What is the right building for our ladder of doing the word? Are we just to do or are there some parameters for our doing? Clearly there are guidelines here and elsewhere in Scripture.

James offers that insight in the final verse we heard read this morning:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Here at First Presbyterian, we have a number of forces at work to help guide us and place our parish ministry ladder on the right building – from our mission statement to the Holy Spirit, from our officers and other servant leaders to our strategies for leveraging available resources. All that we seek to be and do as doers of the word is grounded by the word.

But, the question remains: Who were the orphans and widows that are to be cared for in their distress?

Clearly, in the time of Jesus and James, widows and orphans were the most vulnerable people in society. They had no means of providing for themselves and had to depend on the kindness and generosity of others to survive.

Today, the terms must mean more than just women whose husbands have died or children whose parents have died. In our society it must include anyone vulnerable to exploitation or oppression.

So, when James said that “religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress”, what he was actually saying was that the church was to be engaged in society on the side of the poor, the powerless and the marginalized. True Christianity was not talk about how much we love Jesus; it was action that advocated the cause of the disenfranchised of one’s society – whoever that might be.

Who are orphans and widows in Collier County?

They are the 52% of students who receive free or reduced lunch each day at school

The over 500 homeless

The 12.1% who are unemployed and many more who are underemployed or given up hope of finding employment

The elderly who live alone or in settings where the only visitors are paid staff

They are those who cannot speak English

They are the ones without health insurance

They are real people

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It is with these marginalized people that we are called to serve.

As people of faith we are called to be people of action and of compassion, to care for those on the margins and for all in need.

It means making the effort to get involved and committing the time and energy necessary to stay involved.

Whether you

serve dinner at St. Matthew's

visit those who are homebound

tutor children at Grace Place

ring a bell for Salvation Army

greet patients at the Neighborhood Health Clinic

teach English as a Second Language

sort donations for a ministry's thrift shop

impact Immokalee through PACE or Beth-El

transport residents of Sunlight Home to appointments

lobby for human rights

mentor children at the Boys and Girls Club

weed gardens at ECHO

participate in youth or adult mission trips

or engage in one of dozens of other possible opportunities

**The call is clear: We are to be doers of the Word.**

**What does doing the word look like in your life?**

Know your story and share it. Tell others about your experiences of doing the word with the powerless. Invite them to join you.

My prayer is that we may be known not for our traditions or knowledge, but for how we show our love for God by loving our neighbors and showing special care and concern for those of our neighbors who live on the margins. Amen.

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