

# “Your Life is God’s Highest Priority”

Mark 7:1-13

We have a family tradition on the first day of school each year. We all go to chapel at St. James, and then, because the girls get out at 11:30, we all go to Pop’s Pizza for lunch. On that first day of school, one of the main topics of conversation was the list of rules in each classroom and on the playground. Malinda and I reminded the girls that the rules put in place are there to keep them safe and to allow learning to happen – that is, after all, the goal of attending school.

Traditions are good when there is meaning and value in the tradition. Just like rules are good when there is meaning and value in keeping the rule.

Isaiah and Jesus have some harsh words for the Israelites and their “traditions”. The “true Israelites” made sure everyone saw that they “washed their hands” and made a big show when it came to public, outward, superficial righteousness. They were the “good” people of society and they wanted everyone to know it.

But in secret, their hearts were full of darkness. They kept all the official rules and traditions. They honored God with words and praise on the Sabbath and all holy days, but when it came to living their life as a child of God, they tended to have their own agenda.

And we love to wring our hands and say, “Those evil Israelites. How could they treat God that way?” Last Tuesday, I was sitting around at the KC after my volleyball game and was listening to the conversation of some of my friends (none of whom were Lutheran – I might add). One of them said (of Sunday morning worship), “I know that it is only an hour, but sometimes I am sitting there thinking to myself, ‘There are a lot of things I could be doing.’”

My thoughts turned to the prophet Amos who said, “Hear this, you who trample the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end saying, ‘When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale?’”

When honoring God with your lips is a chore or is something that is only done because “this is what the good people in society do and I don’t want my neighbors to talk about me,” then hearts are far from the Lord your God.

The people in Isaiah’s day had it wrong concerning what God desired of them. They thought going through the motions of the rules and traditions was good enough. The people in Jesus’ day had it wrong. They absolutely misunderstood what kind of relationship God desired to have with them.

Most people today have it wrong concerning what God desires. If you want to understand how God looks at you, listen to Paul’s words in his letter to the Ephesians, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to

the Lord. . . Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.”

The relationship of God to His people is to be like the best that a marriage can be. Throughout the Old Testament, God says, “I was a husband to the house of Israel.” We continually speak of Christ and His bride, the church. You are the church, and Christ loved His bride so much that He willingly gave up His life so that you could live.

If Christ would have been selfish or less concerned, after Adam and Eve sinned, He could have said to God the Father, “You know, we haven’t really known them that long. We could just judge them, wipe them out, and start over.” But God loved Adam as a true child. God loves you as a true child. So much so that your life is His highest priority, even though, from our perspective, we haven’t known Him that long. From His perspective, He has known you since before He laid the foundation of the world. That is what the Bible says.

In turn, as the bride of Christ, we are to submit to, Christ, our husband. That word submit means to willingly put yourself under the authority of someone else. This is not describing being under the thumb of a bully or a dictator. To submit is a selfless, loving act which shows that our “hearts are [not] far from” God. We yield to His authority, but not because we fear the consequences of breaking the rules. We submit to the One who gave His life for us. We submit to the One who washed us clean with water and the word. We submit to the One who, before God

the Father on the Last Day, will present us without spot or wrinkle – we will be holy and without blemish in His sight.

This is the relationship that God desires to have with you. Life in Christ's Church is not simply a list of rules to follow – although the rules God has put in place are there to keep you safe and to allow learning to happen. Life in Christ's Church is not just adhering to certain traditions – although traditions are good when there is meaning and value in the tradition.

Life in Christ's Church is best described in terms of a loving relationship. God has chosen to call you His "family." He adopted you in the waters of Baptism. He calls you His true child. Jesus refers to Himself as your "brother." God the Father says, "I was a husband to Israel." Paul describes the Church as being the bride of Christ for whom He gave His life. Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."

Whatever you consider to be the closest and best relationship you have on this earth, it pales in comparison to the love God has for you. As Paul says, "This mystery is profound." Your life is God's highest priority.  
Amen