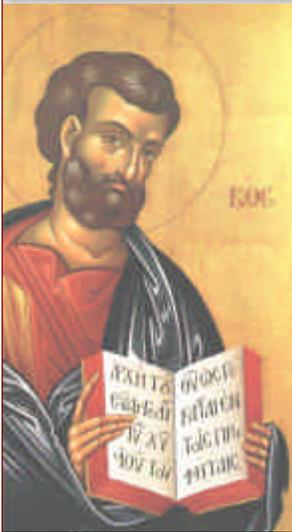


FOLLOW ME

LESSON TEN: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST. MARK 7



FAST FACTS

- The Pharisees criticized Jesus and His disciples for failing to follow Jewish law concerning washing before eating.
- Jesus responded that the Pharisees were following the tradition of men, while neglecting their relationship with God.
- Jesus taught that it is not what does into the body that makes one unclean, but instead the thoughts and behaviors that come from a person's heart.
- Jesus praised the Syro-Phoenician woman for her persistence in asking for His healing.
- Jesus healed a man who was deaf and suffered from a speech impediment.

MAP



MARK 7:1-23

In chapter seven the Pharisees reappear to attack Jesus, this time criticizing Him for allowing His disciples to eat without first ritually washing their hands and eating utensils (the *Mishnah*, the second-century compilation of Jewish oral law, contains thirty chapters on ritually washing pots and dishes). Jesus responds that, while the Pharisees faithfully adhered to their ritual obligations as devout Jews, they neglected the focus of the Law: loving God and others (Deuteronomy 6:4-6).

Many Christians believe that Jesus condemns all religious traditions — including Holy Tradition — in this chapter. Fr. Paul O'Callaghan explains that this is not true:

Jesus did not condemn the Pharisees merely for having traditions; he rejected the false traditions that the Pharisees practiced (cf. Mark 7:9-13) and condemned them for making the observance of certain legitimate traditions more important than following the teachings of God's Word...Jesus taught his disciples to keep the legitimate traditions, but to avoid being hypocritical as the Pharisees were (cf. Matthew 23:1-3). This is exactly the position of the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church rejects traditions that are at variance with the Scriptures, and practices only those which are proper expressions of the Christian faith.

Jesus concludes by explaining that we do not become unclean in God's sight because of accidental con-

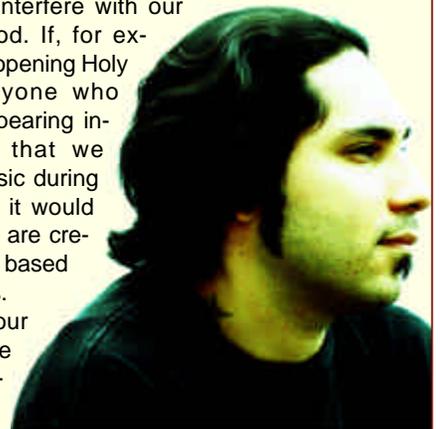
LOOK AT YOURSELF

It is easy for us to look at the traditions mentioned in Mark 7, such as the ritual washing of kitchen utensils, and believe that we are free from the "tradition of men" because we do not allow such things to distract us from God. At the same time, however, there are other ways in which we can become misguided by traditions.

For example, there are some individuals who strongly attack Orthodox Christians whose practices, such as following the Gregorian calendar or allowing clergy to wear modern styles of clerical attire in public, do not exactly duplicate all the Orthodox customs of the nineteenth century. Metropolitan Philip Saliba reminds us, "When...rules, regulations and canons are applied and followed in the spirit of love and compassion, or not applied because they are outdated, they are to our benefit and salvation. When they are merely the following of a certain code or law, however, they lead to spiritual death."

At the same time, we can also be guilty of creating our own traditions that interfere with our relationship with God. If, for example, we advocate opening Holy Communion to anyone who wants it to avoid appearing intolerant, or claim that we should play rock music during the Liturgy because it would be more popular, we are creating a new tradition based upon modern biases.

Are you living our Holy Tradition, or are you following distracting "traditions?"



tact with bad things around us — we defile ourselves by giving in to the passions in our hearts (vv. 14-23). One focus of the spiritual disciplines of the Church is opening our lives to God by getting rid of our evil desires and behavior. St. Innocent of Alaska, a nineteenth-century Russian missionary to North America, teaches:

The first duty of a Christian, of a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ, is to deny oneself. To deny oneself means to give up one's bad habits, to root out of the heart all that ties us to the world; not to cherish bad desires and thoughts; to quench and suppress bad thoughts; to avoid occasions of sin; not to do or desire anything from self-love but to do everything out of love for God. To deny oneself means, according to the Apostle Paul, to be dead to sin and the world, but alive to God.

MARK 7:24-30

After being criticized for failing to adhere to ritual purity, Jesus went into a Gentile region which would have been viewed by the Jews as unclean. Furthermore, He encountered a woman whose daughter was possessed by an “unclean spirit” (vs. 25). Jesus did not originally go into Tyre and Sidon to minister: He wanted no one to know He was in the area (vs. 24) and, when asked by the woman to deliver her daughter from the demon, replied that His ministry was to the Jews (vs. 27).

The Church Fathers tell us to learn from the response of the woman to Jesus' initial refusal to help her. Even when Jesus refused her request to heal her daughter, the woman continued to humbly plead for His help. St. Ephrem the Syrian writes, “She did not give up. Though neglected, she did not hold back. Therefore [He said], ‘Great is your faith, O woman.’” Blessed Theophylact further connects us to the woman's example of humility and persistence:

Our sinful soul has a demon-possessed daughter, our evil deeds. For evil deeds are of the demons. Since we are sinners, we are called, dogs, full of uncleanness. Because of this, we are not worthy to receive the Bread of God, nor to commune of the immaculate Mysteries. But if, through humility, we recognize ourselves for what we are,

OUR FAITH TEACHES

Fr. Justin Popovich, a 20th century Serbian priest, writes about Holy Tradition:

‘Our traditions’ are our whole life in grace in God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, the life of us Christians, which began in the Church of Christ, through the Apostles, by the descent of the Holy Spirit. ... Thus, our “traditions” are the new life of the grace in the Holy Spirit, which is the soul of the Church, the life in the Eternal Truth of God, in the Eternal Justice of God, in the Eternal Love of God, in the Eternal Life of God. Here man is not creating anything, nor can he create the Eternal Truth, the Eternal Justice, the Eternal Love, the Eternal Life, but they are for him to accept, to change into his own.

and acknowledge that we are as dogs, and confess our sins, then our daughter, that is, our demonic deeds, will be healed.

LOOK AT YOURSELF

Are you persistent in prayer, or do you let your personal prayer rule slip everytime you become busy, or praying seems boring or unfulfilling, or when you do not receive the things for which you pray? Remember the words of St. Nilus of Sinai in the fifth century: “Do not grieve if you do not at once receive from God that which you ask. He wishes to benefit you still more by making you persist longer in your patient prayer before Him. For what can be higher than to address one's converse to God and be in communion with Him?”

MARK 7:31-37

Jesus again compassionately healed a person: in this case, a man who was deaf and suffered a speech impediment. Many people wonder why, in healing the speech impediment Jesus would spit onto His fingers and then touch the man's tongue. Blessed Theophylact explains that this action shows that every part of Jesus's body, even His saliva, was “marvelous and divine.”

WHAT DID I LEARN ABOUT FOLLOWING JESUS?

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- What is the difference between Holy Tradition and other traditions? How can following other traditions distract me from God?
 - What about the Syro-Phoenician woman should I imitate?
 - This lesson mentions being persistent in prayer. What are other areas of my relationship with God in which I need to be persistent?
 - What does the fact that Jesus used His saliva to heal the man with the speech impediment tell me about His Incarnation?

